00090752

THE
ASIATIC SOCIETY OF BOMBAY
Town Hall, Bombay.

Digitized with financial assistance from the
Government of Maharashtra
on 05 October, 2018

MISADVENTURE

MISADVENTURE

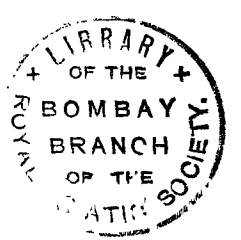
90752

— BY —

W. E. NORRIS

AUTHOR OF

"MY FRIEND JIM," "MAJOR AND MINOR," "LA BELLE AMERICAINE," "MATRIMONY," ETC. ETC.



LONDON
SPENCER BLACKETT
35 ST. BRIDE STREET, LUDGATE CIRCUS, E.C.
1890

[All rights reserved]

A. J. COMBRIDGE & Co., BOMBAY.

Nozimis
90752

CONTENTS.

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	MR. BLIGH	1
II.	MISS BLIGH	12
III.	THE HEIR-APPARENT	21
IV.	MADAME SOURAVIEFF	31
V.	MARK'S LAWYER	40
VI.	ARCHIE GOES OUT FISHING	50
VII.	THE ARRIVAL OF THE ALIEN	59
VIII.	CICELY IS INTERESTED	69
IX.	MORTON REPRESENTS THE FAMILY	78
X.	CICELY HAS POOR SPORT	88
XI.	COPPARD IN TROUBLE	98
XII.	LADY DARE'S BALL	107
XIII.	BOBBY IS PUT OUT OF SUSPENSE	117
XIV.	MR. BLIGH STATES HIS INTENTIONS	125
XV.	MARK MAKES PEACE	135
XVI.	ARCHIE'S TRIUMPH	144

CHAP.		PAGE
XVII.	MORTON SCANDALIZES HIS HOST	154
XVIII.	FORTUNA SÆVO LÆTA NEGOTIO	165
XIX.	DEATH BY MISADVENTURE	172
XX.	ARCHIE RETURNS	183
XXI.	COPPARD'S CONJECTURES	190
XXII.	VICTOR REAPPEARS	200
XXIII.	MARK'S TENANT	208
XXIV.	MADAME SOURAVIEFF IS CRITICIZED	216
XXV.	SIR PETER SHAKES HIS HEAD	226
XXVI.	MADAME SOURAVIEFF SETS TO WORK	234
XXVII.	BOBBY'S GLORY	244
XXVIII.	CLUMSINESS AND SKILL	252
XXIX.	COUNT SOURAVIEFF'S CORRESPONDENCE	262
XXX.	A LITTLE LOSS OF TEMPER	273
XXXI.	A REVELATION	281
XXXII.	THE SWORD FALLS	290
XXXIII.	A COMPETENT ADVISER	299
XXXIV.	MARK'S OPPORTUNITY	308
XXXV.	SYMPATHY	317
XXXVI.	AN ATHLETIC MEETING	325
XXXVII.	THE MEMORY OF THE PAST	334
XXXVIII.	THE RETURN OF THE HERO	343
XXXIX.	CICELY IS INCENSED	352
XL.	BOBBY AS A DETECTIVE	359
XLI.	ARCHIE IS MADE TO WAIT	370

CHAP.		PAGE
XLII.	THEODORI DECLINES A FORTUNE	379
XLIII.	MUTINY	387
XLIV.	MR. LOWNDES'S LEGACY	397
XLV.	ARCHIE'S SENTENCE	405
XLVI.	MR. LOWNDES'S HOLIDAY	413
XLVII.	LAST WORDS	421
XLVIII.	MADAME SOURAVIEFF HEARS SOME GOOD NEWS	429
XLIX.	MARK IS SPARED A JOURNEY	438
L.	CICELY DECIDES	447
LI.	MARK TAKES LEAVE OF ABBOTSPORT	455
LII.	CONCLUSION	465

MISADVENTURE

CHAPTER I.

MR. BLIGH

"It is all very well," observed Mr. Bligh, "to say I am not responsible; and perhaps in a certain sense I am not. Looking back upon the past, I suppose I may claim to have done as much for Morton as most fathers do for their sons. I sent him to Eton and Oxford; I have always made him a handsome allowance; I have paid his debts for him several times with more or less of cheerfulness; I even remember that, when he was a boy, I whipped him twice—the second time rather severely—for acts of wanton cruelty to animals. Moreover, he has had the full benefit of my experience of life and my large philosophy, while you, my dear Lowndes, have, I know, preached your very best sermons, both doctrinal and practical, at him. If, after all this, he has chosen to go to the deuce, the consequences should be upon his own head, you think. But then comes the question of how far any of us are answerable for our proclivities, or ought to be punished for the natural results of them."

The speaker was a man whom most people would have pronounced at first sight to be nearer seventy than sixty, because his hair and his short beard were as white

as snow, and because the clear, pale skin of his face was furrowed by such deep lines; but closer inspection conveyed the idea that these were lines of suffering, and that he was probably younger than he looked. As a matter of fact, he had at this time only just turned his fifty-first year. He was reclining, as he did all day long, in a wheeled chair close to a bay-window, whence he could survey some part of the broad lands which he owned but could not tread. Long periods of neuralgic or rheumatic pain (so called by the doctors, who could find neither a cause nor a cure for them) had culminated at length in what all the doctors were agreed in describing as creeping paralysis, and had changed into a frail worn-out wreck of humanity one whom many middle-aged people could remember as a keen sportsman, a first-rate judge of a horse, and a very popular frequenter of London drawing-rooms. Even now he had not lost all trace of the good looks for which he had once been famous, nor had disease, trouble and disappointment robbed his smile of its good-humoured kindliness.

His friend, Mr. Lowndes, the Rector of Abbotsport, was his senior by some half-dozen years or so, and looked capable of outliving him by a quarter of a century at least. Tall, broad-shouldered and ruddy, his thick black hair and whiskers being only here and there streaked with grey, Mr. Lowndes, had it not been for the clerical garb that he wore, would have had a good deal more of the appearance of a country squire than the crippled invalid whom he sat facing, with a hand on each knee. He said:

"Now, Bligh, you are going to mount one of your fantastic hobbies. You want to excuse and explain everything upon some fanciful theory of inherited tendency, which can't hold water for a single moment. Added to which, you are paying a poor compliment to your forefathers by assuming that Morton inherited his tendencies from them. He certainly didn't get them from you."

"I should be sorry to be uncomplimentary to my forefathers," said Mr. Bligh, with a smile, "but for anything I know to the contrary, there may have been some scoundrels amongst them. And I don't see anything fantastic or fanciful in stating an undeniable fact. You haven't bred as many horses as I have, still you are not ignorant about the subject, and I believe you have bred dogs. You know as well as I do what an important part hereditary tendency plays in that matter, and how often it crops up in an individual after lying dormant for generations."

"We're not talking of horses and dogs," returned Mr. Lowndes, "we're talking of a human being, with a soul and a conscience and a free will. We all of us have our besetting sins, I suppose—though I'm sure I don't know what yours can be—but our business is to conquer them, and if we fail we deserve to suffer for our cowardice. Suppose I have inherited a tendency to some disease—gout, for instance—am I to shrug my shoulders and give in, instead of taking measures to counteract it?"

"Judging by my own experience, I should be inclined to back the disease," said the other. "And then you must allow that we don't all start at even weights."

"Oh, well," said the Rector, a little impatiently—for he was vexed with himself for having made use of an illustration which sounded somewhat unfeeling under the circumstances—"we needn't argue the point, because I am sure that we don't really differ. Excuses, no doubt, can be made for everybody, and let us hope that eventually they will be made. Meanwhile, with our imperfect knowledge of things, we are obliged to judge by what is apparent; and as for Morton—well, I will only say, as I said before, that I wish you wouldn't have him down here. He has refused scores of times when you have asked him; why should you accept his proposal now, when you are ill and when the sight of him is quite enough to make you worse?"

"Oh, I don't think the sight of him will produce that effect upon me," said Mr. Bligh, quietly.

"I do, then; I have known you too long, my dear Bligh, to be taken in by your affectation of stoicism. In all my life I have never met a man who bore pain better or who felt it more. Morton will give you pain every time he opens his lips—you know he will. What's more, he will try to give you pain."

"Perhaps not. I imagine his object in paying us this visit is quite the reverse of that."

"What is his object?" inquired the Rector, who, however, could have answered his own question easily enough.

Mr. Bligh laughed. "After all," he said, "it is only what you and I should do under similar circumstances. Given a dying father, who has absolute control over the disposal of his property, shouldn't we think it our duty to seek him out and express to him a sincere regret for any little differences which might have arisen between us and him?"

"No," answered the Rector, stoutly; "neither you nor I would stoop to such meanness. Besides, you are not dying."

"So the doctors are kind enough to assure me. They say that I may live for a great many more years; but they think it will be a very strange thing if I do. Doctors, of course, can't tell the real truth, but there is no reason that I know of why patients shouldn't, when they happen to be aware of it. The real truth is always bracing and invigorating, though I admit that it often looks rather ugly from a distance; and the truth, I take it, is that Morton is coming because he has heard that his cousin Archie is here, and because that has very naturally alarmed him."

Mr. Lowndes had a pair of round, projecting brown eyes, which now became rounder and projected themselves somewhat more prominently than usual. "Do you mean to say," he began, "that you really propose——"

"Oh no, I don't think it would be right or wise, or in any way desirable. All the same I wish Archie were my son. Even though he is younger than Morton, I might perhaps be justified in making an elder son of him in this case; but nephews, I suppose, must be regarded as out of the question. What do you think of him?"

"I think he is a fine, manly young fellow: I always did think so, and soldiering has improved him immensely. Still, as you say, he is only your nephew. I should have thought—will you allow me to speak my mind plainly to you, Bligh?"

"Haven't I just told you that the unvarnished truth is full of fascination for me?"

"Well, then, I should have thought that if you considered your son unworthy to succeed you—which he most undoubtedly is—you could have left this place to your daughter. I know you can provide for her amply without doing that, and I know that the management of a large property is a heavy burden to place on the shoulders of a young girl. Still, when one has to face two evils one can but choose the smaller; and although Cicely is inexperienced, and a little headstrong at times, her heart is in the right place. And then she will marry. Surely it would be better for us all to have decent Christian people at the Priory than an avowed atheist."

"Is Morton an avowed atheist?"

"If he isn't he ought to be. Holding the views that he does, and living the life that he lives, he has no business to call himself anything else."

"Ah, I think I remember that he once got rather the better of you in a theological discussion."

"No, he didn't," returned the Rector, reddening slightly, "he didn't get the better of me at all. Of course he asked me questions which I couldn't answer; any Sunday-school child could do that—and indeed they often do. The times that I have been bothered

with that tiresome old difficulty about the rainbow and its appearance in waterfalls and fountains! Why, only last week a wretched little whipper-snapper wanted me to explain how it was that Balaam showed so little surprise when his ass entered into conversation with him."

"I have always felt a good deal of curiosity upon that point myself," observed Mr. Bligh. "What did you say?"

"I said that Balaam was a prophet, that he was accustomed to supernatural manifestations, and that an incident of that kind wouldn't be at all likely to astonish him. Then, if you please, my young gentleman wanted to know whether the mouth and tongue of an ordinary donkey were so formed that it would be possible for it to produce sounds resembling articulate speech. He didn't put it in those words, but that was the gist of his inquiries. Now I only mention this to show you how easy it is for a mere child to throw doubts upon the truth of the Scripture narrative."

"I quite see that it is very easy indeed," replied Mr. Bligh, gravely; "but we are wandering away from our rival candidates. Not that Archie is a conscious candidate—at least I hope he isn't."

"I am perfectly sure that no such notion has ever entered his head," cried the Rector, warmly.

"There is no occasion to be so sure as all that; such a notion might have entered his head without disgracing either it or his heart. I only meant to say that I hoped for his sake that he didn't cherish expectations which are so very unlikely to be fulfilled."

There was a pause of a few moments, after which Mr. Bligh resumed: "It will be rather amusing to watch them."

"To watch whom?" asked the Rector.

"Archie and Morton. Of course they will fight; Morton will take good care of that. But Morton never loses his temper, whereas Archie is decidedly

peppery. I should say that Archie would get the worst of it."

"I don't see what there will be amusing in that," grunted Mr. Lowndes, who was a very straightforward, matter-of-fact sort of person, and did not sympathize with all his friend's moods. "I wish you wouldn't say such things, Bligh. They sound—not to me, because I know you—but to other people they might sound a little bit malicious."

"Cripples are always malicious," said Mr. Bligh; "they can't help it. So long as one lives one is bound to get some sort of fun out of existence; and what sort of fun is there within the reach of a man who has lost the use of his legs, except studying his fellow-creatures, and laughing in his sleeve at them? I lie here on my back from morning to night and watch you—Cicely and Archie and the servants, and the people who come to call, and your reverend and respected self. You have no idea how funny you all are."

"Well, I'm glad that I'm not the only subject of ridicule, at all events," observed Mr. Lowndes, with a somewhat dissatisfied look. "What makes us so funny, if I may ask?"

"You would have to break your back before you could understand; and that perhaps is rather too long a price to pay for the privilege. I'm completely out of it, don't you see; I'm still alive, though I'm as good—or as bad—as dead; and that gives me a fine sense of the triviality of everything that excites the rest of you. What does it all matter? In quite a short time the whole generation of us will be wiped out and clean forgotten; isn't it a little comical that we should make so much ado about nothing?"

This (as possibly it may have been intended to do) drew from the Rector an eloquent vindication of the seriousness of life and the far-reaching consequences of every individual act. Furthermore, he thought fit to wind up with a final application of his remarks. "You

have no right to say that you are 'out of it,' Bligh: on the contrary, very great power for good or for evil remains in your hands. The temporal, and for aught I know, the eternal welfare of many people depends upon you, and you can't joke yourself free from your responsibilities. I think you ought to bear that in mind and consider it carefully before you decide to nominate as your successor a man who will—who will——"

"Who will play the deuce generally," suggested Mr. Bligh. "Well, I'll consider it—and him too. He seems to have challenged consideration, so that he can't complain. Nevertheless, I doubt whether any conceivable arrangement that I could make would be wholly satisfactory."

The Rector sighed, and went sorrowfully away. He was very much afraid that his old friend's days were numbered; he was pretty sure that his old friend would not set established custom aside in making his will, and he was quite convinced that infinite harm might be done in the parish of Abbotsport by such a Squire as Morton Bligh would be.

"It's all very unfortunate," he muttered to himself as he mounted his brown cob; "very unfortunate indeed!"

When he had ambled down the long, gently sloping approach, bordered on either side by rhododendrons, which were one of the chief glories of the Priory, and when he had passed through an iron gate, which separated lawns, shrubberies and flower-beds from the park, he turned his horse off the road and cantered across the grass, until he reached a point from which he could look down upon the slate roofs of Abbotsport and the blue veil of smoke which hung motionless over them on that still afternoon of early spring. The little fishing village, overhung by lofty chalk cliffs and protected both from easterly and from westerly gales by sheltering promontories, had been made additionally safe and snug by a breakwater, constructed some years

back at the expense of Mr. Bligh. The same munificent benefactor had supplied the inhabitants with the solid school-house, which Mr. Lowndes could descry, and had carried out a great many other works of public utility during his reign. There had always been Blighs at the Priory, and they had always owned the whole of Abbotsport; but they had been far less powerful, because far less wealthy, than the present holder of the estate, who, while still a young man, had inherited a large fortune from his mother's family. That he had spent his income wisely and well could not be denied. He had found Abbotsport poverty-stricken, dirty and over-populated, and by dint of judicious expenditure, combined with some exercise of authority, which had been at first resented, but subsequently acquiesced in (because improved circumstances always promote a spirit of toleration), he had converted the community over which he ruled into a prosperous and contented one. He had been a benevolent despot, but like other benevolent despots he laboured under the disadvantage of being mortal; so that there could be no certainty of the work which he had inaugurated being carried on.

"Besides, I am not sure that he hasn't sapped their independence," mused the Rector, as he gazed down on the little fleet of fishing smacks, which were stealing in before a very light, southerly breeze. "They have got too much into the habit of looking to the Priory for help the moment that anything goes wrong, and it's precious little help they are likely to get from Morton Bligh. Cicely would take care that their wants were supplied, at any rate, though no doubt she would be injudicious, and she has inherited her father's disinclination to be guided by advice. Still she would be sure to marry before long; and if she had a husband who was a decent fellow"—Mr. Lowndes paused for a moment in his meditation and tapped his boot pensively with the handle of his riding-whip. "Now, if Cicely would marry her cousin," he resumed presently, "and I

strongly suspect that her cousin wouldn't object to the arrangement—Good gracious, Archie, how you made me jump! You ought to know better than to play such tricks upon an old man whose reins are hanging loose. It's lucky that nothing ever startles the cob."

The young man, who had playfully thrown a fir-cone at the Rector's broad back, laughed and said: "The cob's ears are quicker than yours, Mr. Lowndes; he knew I was behind you two or three minutes ago."

This young man, who was tall, spare and broad-shouldered, and had a slight, fair moustache, with an upward twist to it, bore the marks of his profession as plainly as if he had been dressed in full cavalry uniform. Without being exactly good-looking, he possessed the beauty which belongs to youth and physical vigour, and he had a pleasant, smart, sunburnt appearance. Also his blue eyes seemed to belong to an honest mortal. "What were you dreaming about?" he asked. "About the future fate of that intemperate flock of yours?"

"Well, yes," answered the Rector. "I was thinking about their future, poor fellows! Not that they are so very intemperate, except now and then, when they have had a great catch of fish, and even at such times they are a good deal better than they used to be. Nevertheless, I sometimes feel anxious about them. I've just seen your uncle, and he tells me that Morton is expected at the Priory this evening."

"Yes, I believe so; it's rather a bore. I don't know much about him, but I've always understood that he is an awful blackguard."

"He isn't so much that—at least not in the way that you probably mean. There's always hope for the sort of man whom you would call an awful blackguard."

"Oh! And isn't there any hope for Morton?"

The Rector shook his head. "I'll tell you what Morton is," said he; "he's a thoroughly bad-hearted fellow. You may have heard stories about him. I don't want to enter upon them, and indeed they are stories of a sort which you young fellows don't generally mention before parsons. It would be very wrong of me and quite against my duty and my conscience to make light of sin of any kind: yet there *is* a difference, you know. A man may be chivalrous in spite of his wickedness. It isn't very long since Sir James Hannen addressed Morton Bligh from the Bench in words which—which, upon my honour, I think I would rather have been hanged than have heard addressed to me. But I don't believe he cared."

"Everybody said he behaved thundering badly," observed the young man. "I was in India at the time, you know; so I only heard about it through the newspapers. Was that why Uncle Wilfrid quarrelled with him?"

"Oh, there wasn't any quarrel. Your uncle never quarrels; and if he had meant to wash his hands of Morton, as most fathers would have done, he might have found ample excuse for that years ago. I don't mind telling you that that is what I should have done. As a general principle, I am opposed to placing women in positions of authority, but supposing I had to choose between Cicely and Morton my choice would be very soon made."

"Only Cicely will marry some day, I suppose."

"Yes; but when she does, her husband won't have things all his own way. That fortunate fellow—because he will be a very fortunate fellow—may as well make up his mind to accept the part of a prince-consort."

The Rector looked rather hard at his companion, who gazed imperturbably out to sea, and then he added, with an abrupt chuckle: "Put that in your pipe and smoke it, young man."

CHAPTER II.

MISS BLIGH

THE young lady who Mr. Lowndes had quite accurately described as possessing a strong will of her own was, at the time when she was being thus criticized, discharging one of the duties incident to her station in life, by visiting the poor. There were always plenty of poor people in the village of Abbotsport, which, being situated at a distance of three miles (and mostly up-hill miles) from the nearest railway station, could not dispose of its fish with the ease and profit enjoyed by some of its neighbours on the south coast. However, they were none of them destitute, nor in any danger of becoming so, because they had Miss Cicely Bligh, as well as her father, to look after them. Whenever Miss Cicely walked down to the village (and that was three or four times a week on an average) she carried on her arm a basket, which was heavy on leaving the Priory and light on its return. For this reason she was always a welcome visitor; and if her instructions and rebukes were rather more peremptory than some folks thought becoming in one so young, yet they were magnanimous enough to pardon her in consideration of her pretty face and her kind heart, and smiled with good-humoured toleration, when her back was turned, at her mania for cleanliness, her determination that everybody should go to church once a week, and all her other little fads and fancies. In reality, the housewives of Abbotsport were mortally afraid of her, though they would have died rather than admit such a thing.

It mattered very little to Cicely whether they admitted or denied a circumstance of which she was fully aware. She knew that she could always carry her point, whatever it might be, and the only thing she

regretted was that people should ever waste time by arguing with her, when it would have been so much more simple and sensible to give in at once. To be sure she shared the inestimable boon, with which Abbotsport at large was blessed, of being seldom pressed for time. On this particular afternoon she had gone her rounds and had administered her charities, together with a few necessary scoldings, as usual, and now she thought she would stroll down to the harbour and see the trawlers come in. So she made her way along the steep streets to the water side—a natty, well-proportioned, and very upright little figure, with her long sable boa flung back over her shoulders and her empty basket swinging.

Cicely Bligh had the family features, which were such as the family had no reason to complain of. Her nose was slightly aquiline; but it was such a diminutive specimen of that class that nobody with the slightest sense of the fitness of terms would have dared to call it a hook. Her upper lip, which was very short, had an outward curve; the lower one was somewhat full; her chin was perfectly rounded, without being too prominent, her dark eyebrows were straight, and from beneath them there looked forth a pair of large, steadfast, grey eyes, for the discomfiture of evil-doers and the sad undoing of susceptible young men. She was, beyond all reach of rivalry, the beauty of the county; and how could she help knowing it when she had been told as much such a number of times? She did not, however, value herself so much upon her good looks—which were hers by clear right of inheritance, and, therefore, not worth boasting about—as upon her strict integrity of purpose, and her truly remarkable accuracy of judgment. To these fine qualities she flattered herself that her claim was undisputed; and so, in truth, it was, because nobody wanted to dispute it with her. From her father—the only human being to whom she owed or owned allegiance—she met with little or no opposition,

her views and tastes being fortunately very much the same as his own. Illness had of late so incapacitated him that he had been compelled to manage a great part of his affairs vicariously, and from being his delegate his daughter had insensibly become his substitute. As for her aunt, Miss Skipwith, who had been asked to stay a few weeks at the Priory soon after Mrs. Bligh's death and who had remained there for fifteen years, Cicely had never been told to regard that lady as placed in authority over her, and had never dreamt of doing so. Thus she was about as independent as a young woman can be; and perhaps rather more so than it is good for any young woman to be, seeing that the absolute equality of the sexes has not yet been admitted, even in the most progressive countries.

The trawlers, of which Abbotsport boasted but four, had already entered the harbour when she reached it, and a knot of more or less interested persons had collected on the pier, to watch them discharge their load of fish and to help in carting it away. This was a somewhat lengthy operation—because, as has been mentioned, Abbotsport disdained hurry—but Cicely waited patiently until it was almost completed, when she caught sight of a weather-beaten, grey-bearded man, who touched the brim of his sou'-wester to her with a slightly deprecating air.

"Coppard," said she, fixing her eyes upon him severely, "I am surprised to see you going out with the trawlers among these boys. I should have thought you might have found some better employment than that."

"You're right there, Miss," answered the man, "as you mostly are. Come to my time o' life, better employment I ought to have, and that's Gospel truth. But food must be purvided for the young 'uns some way or other, and times is terribly bad just now."

"Times are bad with you, you mean," interrupted Cicely, "and no wonder! I didn't see you at church on Sunday, Coppard."

"You did not, Miss," replied Mr. Coppard, with a great show of straightforward candour. "You did not see me, for the reason that I were not there. I were very porely o' Sunday and compelled for to keep my bed."

"You couldn't expect to be anything else after having been disgracefully intoxicated all Saturday."

"What?—me, Miss?" cried Mr. Coppard, in extreme astonishment. "Me disgracefully intox—well, I never! Who could ha' been and told you such a thing as that about me in my habsence?"

"The same person who told me that you had sold your share in the *Rover* and spent all the money. It really is too bad, Coppard."

"So 'tis, Miss; and a great refreshment it has been to me to get two nights at sea beyond reach o' that there woman's tongue. 'Spent all the money,' says she! And her with a new gownd to her back—as you might ha' noticed o' Sunday, Miss, and did notice, I make no doubt. But she's well known far and wide for what she is, and there ain't a six year old child in Abbotsport as pays any manner o' heed to *her* talk."

"When I have seen that new gown I shall believe that poor Mrs. Coppard got it from you," observed Miss Bligh, placidly. "I am afraid it is useless to remonstrate with you, and certainly it is quite useless to try and help you. I am very sorry now that I asked my father to buy a share in the *Rover* for you."

"Now don't 'ee say that, Miss. Squire he hacted for the best—likewise yourself; but as for getting a living out of part share in a hopen boat, 'taint to be thought of, Miss; and what I do I do for the sake of my family as should be more grateful to me."

"I really think there is something in that, Miss Bligh," chimed in a gentle and deferential voice from the background. "A man must catch a great many dabs and congers before he can expect to get a fair day's wages for a fair day's work."

Cicely whisked round sharply, and was thus brought face to face with a young man in a blue serge suit, who took off his cap to her. He was a young man of something under middle height, square-built, clean-shaven and fresh-complexioned. He was as evidently a sailor as Archie Bligh was a soldier, and if a little less smart-looking than that gentleman was certainly handsomer, his features being quite classic in their regularity, and his big brown eyes almost as expressive as a dog's. Cicely held out her hand to him with a little air of condescension and patronage. "Oh, how do you do, Bobby?" said she. "Have you been out with the trawlers?"

"That he has, Miss," answered Coppard, who perhaps was not unwilling to bring about a change of subject; "and though I don't care to flatter no one, I will say there's not a many officers in Her Majesty's Navy as can sail a boat like Captain Dare."

"Not *Captain* Dare, surely," said Cicely. "I know you are no longer a midshipman, Bobby, but I didn't know you had jumped up quite so high as that."

"Sub-lieutenant," answered the individual entitled to that rank, modestly. Then he added in an apologetic tone, "I can't be so near blue water without wanting to be upon it; so as these fellows offered to take me trawling with them, I thought I would go and see what it was like. We've had good luck and fine weather, I am glad to say; but it must be a hard life in the winter time."

Bobby Dare was one of the many sons of Sir George Daré, who shared with Mr. Bligh the pre-eminence in the southern county where the properties of both of them were situated. Cicely had known Bobby all her life, and was well aware that he had humbly adored her from his infancy. She said: "I don't think I should much care to spend a night on board a trawler. How did you manage about washing and dressing in the morning?"

"Well, I jumped overboard and had a swim," said the young man. "Do I look very grubby?"

Cicely took a calm and deliberate survey of him from head to foot. "Not more so than might have been expected," she replied, at length. "And so Coppard has been talking you over? I daresay he would find it easy enough to do that."

The young sailor laughed, pushed his cap to the back of his head and glanced over his shoulder. Perceiving that Coppard had judiciously effected a movement of retreat, he said: "I confess that I have a sneaking affection for that old rascal. I suppose he gets drunk now and then, like the rest of them, and I know he's an arrant poacher; but for all that he's a fine seaman. So are most of these fellows, for that matter. Oh, dear! what a pity it is that press-gangs have been done away with!"

"If you could kidnap our fishermen they would be very much thrown away in the navy, I think," Cicely declared. "What is the use of fine seamanship on board one of those hideous iron hulks that you call men-of-war? Besides, you never have any fighting to do."

"Perhaps we shall, though, one of these days," returned Mr. Dare, hopefully. "Even as it is, we often have to help the soldiers out ashore."

"In skirmishes with savages, you mean? But isn't that rather poor fun? You see, you are quite certain of being able to beat them, with the weapons that you have. If I were a man I would much rather be in the cavalry, like Archie," said Cicely, to provoke him.

But Bobby was of far too simple and modest a nature to be irritated by such malicious attacks.

"It is a matter of taste," said he. "We can't be all in the cavalry, and I shouldn't have done for it even if the governor could have stood the expense, because I never could make head or tail of a horse. But I daresay I shall do my duty as well as Archie when the time comes. At least I hope so."

"Of course you will do it a great deal better, you dear, stupid old Bobby!" said Miss Bligh, who always chose to talk to this neighbour of hers as though he had been much younger than herself. "You belong to the class out of which heroes are made, and will certainly end your career as an Admiral of the Fleet and a G.C.B., if only we give you the chance of distinguishing yourself by fighting the French or the Russians or somebody. Archie isn't that sort of person at all. One can't fancy Archie flourishing a Field Marshal's bâton, and I'm sure he doesn't want such a thing."

A slight flush of pleasure had overspread Mr. Dare's cheeks when he heard himself described as a potential hero, but he did not appear to be altogether satisfied with Cicely's criticisms upon her cousin.

"You must like him very much, or you wouldn't run him down," was his comment upon them.

"What do you mean?" asked the girl, with a wondering look.

"Only that I think you often run down the people whom you care for. You don't mind giving a little pat on the back to the others—such as myself."

"You are rather rude, and rather ungrateful," Cicely remarked. "I am not at all in the habit of running anybody down, except, just occasionally, a few persons who deserve it; but I certainly do like Archie very much. Have you any objection to my liking him?"

Bobby did object very strongly to her entertaining anything beyond a sisterly affection for her cousin. But he could hardly say so without proceeding to further statements which he was not prepared to make on the spur of the moment; so he only said, rather despondingly, "Archie is the sort of fellow whom everybody is bound to like."

"Aunt Susan doesn't," said Cicely, laughing; "she calls him a 'designing young man.'"

"Oh—Miss Skipwith! But then she hardly counts;

does she? I mean, of course, she is a good old thing and all that, only nobody pays much attention to her."

"No, nobody pays much attention to her," agreed Cicely, in a somewhat grave voice.

During the above conversation they had been moving slowly away from the quay, and were now mounting the steep street which led in the direction of the Priory. It did not lead towards Instowe, where Sir George Dare lived; but perhaps Bobby was not eager to take the shortest way home.

"Why does she call Archie designing?" he asked presently.

"Oh, I suppose she thinks that my father will make him his heir instead of Morton. One can't wonder at her thinking so. My father won't do it, but it is what a great many people would do."

After this there was silence for some minutes. Then Bobby said, "My sisters told me that your brother was expected down here. Is that true?"

"Yes; he wrote to propose it himself, and he is to arrive this evening. Probably he has the same idea as Aunt Susan, and thinks it is time for him to bestir himself." After a pause the girl resumed: "I don't feel as if he were my brother at all. I have only seen him twice in my life, and I didn't like him. Is it wrong, I wonder, to dislike one's brother when he is so very disagreeable?"

"It can't be wrong, or you wouldn't do it." answered Bobby, with conspicuous imbecility. "Besides," he continued, "I never met any one who didn't hate Morton. It is just like him to make up to poor Mr. Bligh at the last, after turning his back upon him all these years."

Now this was a perfectly true and justifiable speech, but the effect of it upon Cicely was not quite what the speaker could have wished. "What do you mean by 'the last?'" she exclaimed, turning upon him angrily. "It is abominable of you to say such things! I don't

mind the people in the village, because it is their way of showing sympathy, and when they are in the least ill they always think they must be going to die; but you have no right to be so stupid, and so—so brutal. You must know perfectly well that my father is not a bit worse than he was a year ago. Don't you know it?"

Bobby might have replied that he had been afloat a year ago, and consequently had not seen Mr. Bligh at the time referred to; also, if he had been strictly honest he would have had to say that he thought Mr. Bligh very ill indeed. But he did neither of these things; he only stammered out in accents of deep contrition, "Oh, I beg your pardon; I'm awfully sorry; I didn't think of what I was saying. I—I daresay he isn't nearly as bad as he looks."

"Well," said Cicely, more calmly, "you know nothing at all about it; that's one comfort. The truth is that his general health is perfectly good; and although he may never be able to walk again" (here Cicely's eyes suddenly filled with tears and her voice trembled) "there is nothing—nothing at all in his present condition to make us feel alarmed about him. I have Sir Peter Parsons's authority for saying so, and I suppose you will admit that Sir Peter understands his business."

Bobby hastened to declare that he never for a moment thought of setting up his opinion against that of the eminent physician in question. Indeed he was certain that Sir Peter might be right. Still, of course, Morton might think differently.

This explanation having been more or less graciously accepted, he felt encouraged to ask whether Miss Bligh wouldn't like to come out fishing some day. Coppard, he said, had assured him that there was plenty of pollock in the bay, and sometimes one could have a lot of fun with a big conger. "And if it's necessary for you to have a chaperon," he added, a little reluctantly, "perhaps Miss Skipwith would come."

At this Cicely burst out laughing. "I really believe Aunt Susan would rather get on the back of a horse than trust herself in a boat," said she. "I'll go out fishing with you some day, Bobby, and I daresay I may bring Archie with me if he cares to come. I certainly sha'n't require a chaperon to look after me in the company of my own cousin and a boy like you. Now I have taken you quite far enough out of your way. Good-night."

Sub-lieutenant Dare, who was two-and-twenty years of age, did not quite relish being called a boy, but it was something to have obtained Cicely's assent to his modest proposition, and it was something to know that Miss Skipwith might be dispensed with. As for Archie, perhaps he wouldn't want to come. "And perhaps if he does come he will be sick," thought the young sailor.

It is thus that love, which is in itself so pure and beautiful a sentiment, is wont to inspire even the most generous minds with ignoble desires.

CHAPTER III.

THE HEIR-APPARENT

ALL his life long Archie Bligh had been practically his own master. It is a fate which is usually considered to be undesirable for the young; yet it has its alleviations, and Archie, for his part, had never felt disposed to repine at it. Of his father he had no recollection at all; his mother, who had idolized him and done her best to spoil him (but had not succeeded), had died while he was still at Sandhurst; and as his Uncle Wilfrid thus became his nearest relation, it was natural that he should have spent at the Priory such holiday time as remained to him before he was gazetted

to the 24th Lancers. The Priory, indeed, had always been a sort of second home to him, so that when, after an absence of three years in India, he returned with his regiment to his native shores, the first use that he made of his leave was, of course, to betake himself to Abbotsport. Perhaps it was almost equally a matter of course that the first thing he did upon arriving there was to fall over head and ears in love with his cousin Cicely; for there was scarcely a young man within a twenty mile radius of that enchantress's abode who was not in the same sad case. Archie, to be sure, might have remained exempt, seeing that Cicely and he had been companions as children, and that he had not been at all in love with her then; but that was because his youthful affections had been given to the eldest Miss Dare, who was now approaching her thirtieth year and had never been remarkable for personal beauty.

One cannot be a dashing young cavalry officer and possess a snug little fortune of one's own without having been made the object of flattering attentions on the part of the ladies who frequent garrison towns. Archie, therefore, knew something of women, and thought that he knew a great deal. And this rendered him low-spirited; for his experience convinced him that Cicely had by no means fallen a victim to his attractions. She did not even seem to be aware that he had fallen a victim to hers; although he had done his best to place that fact outside the range of scepticism. She made no stranger of him; she treated him very much as if he had been her brother—not to say her younger brother—she did not exert herself to entertain him, and took it for granted that he could amuse himself in his own way without her help. That very afternoon, when he had offered to accompany her to the village, she had laughed in his face, remarking, "I don't think you could visit any of my poor people without longing to be rid of me, and I am sure I

couldn't visit any of them without longing to be rid of you." So he had been reduced to the necessity of taking a solitary walk into the country, which is a very dismal way of spending an afternoon. After his meeting with Mr. Lowndes, he sauntered down the hill towards Abbotsport, and in due course of time his hopes were fulfilled by the appearance of his cousin, who greeted him from afar with a wave of her empty basket.

"Am I late for dinner?" she asked, when he quickened his pace and joined her. "Did they send you to look for me?"

"Oh dear no," said Archie, consulting his watch, "there's heaps of time before dinner; I did come to look for you, but that was on my own hook, and because I thought that perhaps, if I had the luck to meet you, you would let me walk home with you. What a long afternoon this has been!"

"Poor fellow!" exclaimed Cicely, with half-ironical compassion; "I suppose it must be desperately slow for you down here. What have you been doing with yourself since luncheon?"

"Nothing, in the fullest sense of the word. And what have you been doing?—if I may ask."

"Well, I have distributed jellies and bunches of grapes to sick people, and I have listened to the domestic woes of Mrs. Coppard, and I have seen the trawlers come in, and I have administered a well-deserved scolding to Coppard, and I have had an interview with Bobby Dare, who, by the way, had returned from a two days' cruise with the fishermen. Just imagine sleeping on board a trawler for pleasure! Why is it that sailors always want to be at sea when they are ashore, and that soldiers hate nothing so much as the sight of a red coat when they are on leave?"

"Because sailors are usually men of one idea," said Archie, promptly. "Other people like to have a change occasionally."

"And you are beginning to think that you would like a change now, I daresay. I don't wonder at it; only, selfishly speaking, I wish you could bring yourself to stay here until Morton takes his departure. I don't want to have Morton left upon my hands. I don't understand him, and, what is more, I'm afraid of him."

"I don't believe you're afraid of anybody or anything in the world," returned her cousin; "but of course I shall be only too glad to stay here until I'm turned out, and I'll do my best to be civil to your brother."

"Will you?" asked the girl rather eagerly; "I hope you will. He will certainly try to provoke you, but if you will bear in mind that that is what he wants, and if you will decline to be provoked, you will not only disappoint him but make things much smoother for the rest of us."

"Oh, I'll keep my temper," said Archie, with a laugh. "He seems to be an amiable sort of chap. Why should he want to provoke me?"

Cicely looked at him with a somewhat pitying smile. The reason was so obvious that he might surely have divined it. However, she liked him none the less for his obtuseness and only said: "Morton isn't amiable; he tries to provoke most people. He used to succeed with me; but I don't mean him to succeed again, and I hope he won't with you."

"Does he succeed with Dare?" asked Archie after a pause.

"I don't think he has ever had the chance; but anyhow he wouldn't be likely to consider poor Bobby worth powder and shot."

The slightly contemptuous tone in which this opinion was enunciated reassured Archie upon a point as to which he had begun to feel certain misgivings, and when he parted from his cousin and went upstairs to dress for dinner, he felt in a sufficiently good humour to face any number of disagreeable strangers.

The Priory, as regarded a large portion of its outer walls, was an ancient structure; but it had been constantly added to by its present owner, while the interior had been so thoroughly restored, re-modelled, and re-decorated, that it was to almost all intents and purposes modern. Many people, of course, thought this a pity, and said so; but then as Mr. Bligh was wont to remark, in answer to these criticisms, they had not been called upon to live in the old house. He and his architect had done their best with the materials at their command. The fine old entrance-hall and the broad oak staircase had been left intact, and dark corridors, broken by unexpected steps, still afforded a somewhat dangerous channel of communication with the bedrooms; but, since it had been found impossible to retain the distinctive character of the building in the living-rooms, all attempts to reconcile mediævalism with modern requirements had been abandoned there, and the library, to which Archie betook himself in the course of half an hour, was, as the critics complained, "utterly characterless." It was, however, spacious, cheerful, and sunny, when there was any sun to shine.

It was in this room that Mr. Bligh now spent nearly the whole of the day, and here Archie found him, resting in his wheeled chair by the bay window, and with a slightly troubled look upon his usually placid face. Beside him sat his sister-in-law, Miss Skipwith, whose face was seldom placid and now displayed signs of unwonted agitation and excitement. "I can't think it wise, Wilfrid," she was saying, as Archie entered.

There were a good many things and there were two people at the Priory which and whom Miss Skipwith could not think wise. She was a thin, anxious, nervous little woman, with fluffy flaxen hair, which was turning grey, and prominent pale blue eyes. She was very much in awe of Mr. Bligh, although she had a poor opinion of his sagacity, and she worshipped her niece, of whose manners and customs she strongly disapproved.

Her whole life was a mild protest, which those who lived under the same roof with her accepted smilingly and never thought of resenting.

"Who has been making a fool of himself now, Miss Skipwith?" inquired Archie.

Miss Skipwith, who had never had any great affection for this young man and thought him disposed to be impertinent, drew herself up, compressed her lips, and made no reply; but Mr. Bligh said: "Oh, you'll see presently, and I daresay you will agree with Susan. Nevertheless, I might have made an even greater fool of myself if I had refused to receive my only son. The most foolish thing that anybody can do is to put himself gratuitously in the wrong. Perhaps, if sufficient opportunity is given to him, Morton may do that, and then Susan will think better of me. Doesn't that strike you as a wise way of looking at things?"

Archie was fond of his uncle, because the latter had always been kind to him and had been a good sportsman in bygone days; but he was not fond of irony, which he would probably have defined as a needless and irritating habit of saying what you didn't mean. "I don't know anything at all about it," he answered rather curtly.

At this moment the door opened and Cicely and her brother entered the room together. There was a strong family resemblance between them; but this resemblance, as the most careless observer must have noticed at a glance, was only skin deep. Morton Bligh had been a very handsome man, and was so still, despite his waxy, unhealthy complexion, and the grey threads in his dark hair. Like his sister he was small, well-proportioned, and had delicately moulded features; but his eyes and mouth differed greatly from hers, the former being narrow, glittering and too close together, while his lips were thin and had acquired an habitually smiling set which had no suggestion of mirth about it.

"I don't think you have ever met your cousin Archie before, Morton," said Mr. Bligh.

"Don't remember to have had that pleasure," answered the new-comer, holding out a limp, white hand. "Been in India, haven't you—or somewhere? I forget whether you're a plunger or a gunner."

Archie explained good-humouredly that he was neither the one nor the other, and mentioned the distinguished corps to which he had the honour to belong.

"Oh, ah!—the 24th Lancers, of course," said the other. "Beg your pardon, I'm sure. I suppose a Lancer doesn't like being called a plunger, does he?"

"That entirely depends upon who calls him so," said Archie.

"Really? Well, I hope you mean that you don't mind my having called you so. The fact is that I know very little about soldiers; though I believe I was once in the Yeomanry myself. I joined the Yeomanry to please you, you know," he added, turning to his father.

"And retired to please yourself," observed Mr. Bligh.

"Exactly so. I'm too much given to pleasing myself; but it's never too late to mend, and I'm going to turn over a new leaf now. The fact of my being where I am at this moment is a pretty convincing proof of that."

"You don't flatter us," said Miss Skipwith, drily.

"My dear Aunt Susan, I'm incapable of it; I don't know how to flatter people, and it has been a great disadvantage to me through life. Besides, you would never have believed me if I had told you that I came here for the pleasure of seeing you all."

Mr. Bligh laughed a little at this, but the other three persons present remained grave and felt the announcement of dinner to be a relief. Morton, however, did not seem to consider a change of subject obligatory or

desirable. While he was eating his soup he explained that much as he hated the country he had thought it best to familiarize himself with it, and with the management of a property which in the natural course of things must shortly be his. "One may not be enamoured of one's station in life," said he, "still as one can't escape from it, the only plan is to endeavour to fit oneself for it."

Cicely reddened with suppressed anger; Archie was greatly shocked and scandalized; and Miss Skipwith, in a high tremulous voice, began to talk about the danger that was sure to be done to the fruit-blossoms by the late frosts. But Mr. Bligh appeared to be much more tickled than annoyed at the calmness with which his approaching demise was counted upon. Morton was in many respects a queer, distorted reproduction of himself, and he recognized this with some inward amusement. He himself had always had a great love for truth, and a great contempt for the phrases in which it is customary to wrap up truth; only as he was courteous and kind-hearted, he could not have expressed himself as Morton did. That his son did not love him he was perfectly aware, and that his son should make no secret of the fact scarcely disturbed him. What, perhaps, he did not quite realize was that his son was a very clever fellow.

That was certainly not the opinion formed of him by Archie, who thought he had never met such a brute in his life. Archie, as has been said, was accustomed to look upon the Priory as his home, and had some right to do so, whereas Morton had not been near the place for many years. It was, therefore, not a little exasperating to the former to be treated by the latter as a guest. After Miss Skipwith and Cicely had left the dining-room, Morton (who was rapidly disposing of a decanter of port) urged him to have another glass of claret, begged him to smoke if he felt inclined, and apologized for the dulness of

Abbotsport, where, he said, one really had no business to ask a man to stay at that season of the year. Mindful of the promise that he had made, Archie kept his temper and responded civilly; but Morton's whole demeanour made his blood boil, and later in the evening he confided to Cicely that if that fellow meant staying, he was afraid he would have to go.

"I thought you would," remarked the girl, rather sadly; "I am not at all surprised at it."

"I won't go if you would rather I didn't," said Archie, brightening up a little.

"Well, I told you that I didn't want to have Morton left on my hands; and I told you that he would try to provoke you. Can't you manage to despise him?"

"Oh, yes, I think I can manage that much," replied the young man with a short laugh.

"I mean can't you manage not to care what he says or does? My father isn't angry, you see; yet he has rather more reason to be angry, perhaps, than you have."

"I'll try to imitate him," answered Archie, sighing. "It isn't going to be easy, though, I can see."

He was young and peppery, while his uncle was old and philosophical, sick and weary. Moreover, his uncle, after all, was master of the house, and of the situation, which made a difference. One may put up with a good deal of insolence and bad temper from a man whom it is in one's power to disinherit at any moment. Still, Archie was resolved to exercise self-control, and his resolution was put to a tolerably severe test when Morton and he had adjourned to the smoking-room.

"Cicely," observed Morton, after offering his cousin a cigar, "has grown up into a devilish good-looking girl. I suppose one will have to find a husband for her soon."

"I should think she would choose for herself," said Archie, shortly.

"Well, it will save trouble if she does—supposing she makes a reasonable choice, that is. But she strikes me as a rather unreasonable sort of young woman.

Added to which, there's nobody for her to choose down here. A season in London might open her eyes a little."

"In what way?" inquired Archie.

"Oh, I don't say that it would make a reasonable being of her: there are so few reasonable beings about. But it would probably enlighten her as to her own market value, which is really a good bit above the average. You may depend upon it that the governor won't leave her a penny less than thirty thousand pounds."

"Oh, that is her market value, is it?" said Archie. "Fortunately she is not likely to offer herself for sale."

Morton screwed up his eyes and laughed unpleasantly. "You think she will marry for love then?" said he.

"Yes, that is what I think, certainly."

"We must try to save her from making such an idiot of herself. Love is delightful; nobody has been more often in love than I have, and nobody appreciates the emotion more thoroughly. But then I have never made the mistake of imagining that it could last more than two years at the very outside. Marriage is another affair altogether; marriage is essentially a bargain, and women are very well aware of that."

"You speak as though all women were alike."

"So they are, my dear fellow. The popular belief is that there is a great gulf fixed between good and bad women; but that's nonsense. They differ in their talk, but they no more differ in their actions than men do."

"I should have said that men differed a good deal in their actions," observed Archie.

"That's only because circumstances vary; it isn't because human nature varies. It wouldn't occur to you to steal a leg of mutton; but you would a great deal rather steal a leg of mutton than be hungry. We're all tarred with the same brush: only it isn't supposed to be the proper thing to say so."

"I don't know how that may be," said Archie, "but

I know that if I had a sister, I shouldn't like to talk about her as you do about yours."

"You wouldn't like to face facts, you mean; very few people do. Still it's the safest plan, upon the whole; and one unquestionable fact is that Cicely won't fall a prey to a fortune-hunter if her affectionate brother can prevent it."

To this Archie made no rejoinder; but throwing his cigar into the fire, got up and went to bed. It might be possible, he thought, to avoid quarrelling with Morton, but it was quite impossible to help wanting to break his neck.

CHAPTER IV.

MADAME SOURAVIEFF

In the drawing-room of a small but artistically furnished house in Clarges Street, a lady was seated, scribbling off notes and letters with a great appearance of haste. This was the Countess Souravieff, a name pretty well-known in all European capitals, except London, and now in a fair way to achieve notoriety there also. That the Countess would ever achieve anything more than that doubtful advantage was, perhaps, not very likely; because in these days political adventurers have to contend almost everywhere against democratic institutions, which limit the scope of their ingenuity. Still she was in some degree a personage. Diplomatists took her into account; Prime Ministers (one or two of them at all events) asked her to dinner and listened with interest to what she had to say; and the police kept a solemn and watchful eye upon her movements. This pleased her very much; for she was an ambitious woman, and, what was more, she was quite in earnest. If there was one thing about which Madame Souravieff was more certain than another (and she was certain

about a remarkable number of things) it was that the Slavonic races were destined to rule the world. That being so, the sooner the Slavonic races got into the saddle the better, and she was now devoting all her energies to giving them a leg up. With this end, and with certain subordinate and private ends of her own in view, she had taken a house in Mayfair for the season, and initiated friendly relations with a few politicians and journalists, and explained to sundry great ladies that if she did not live with her husband, that was only because her husband was a man for whom it was impossible to feel anything but antipathy. She was not divorced from him; she was not even separated from him; but, since they could not meet without disagreeing, they had thought it advisable to meet as seldom as might be.

Judging by the quantity of invitation cards which lay upon her writing-table, the great ladies had considered these excuses sufficiently valid, and there was every prospect of Madame Souravieff proving herself a social, if not a political, success. She had been a very pretty woman, and one would not have thought of employing the pluperfect tense in speaking of her had it not been for a few grey hairs in the neighbourhood of her temples and a slight inclination towards *embonpoint* in her figure. Her complexion and her teeth were as perfect as they had always been, and her large, dark eyes quite as expressive. One kind of critic might have objected that her cheekbones were a little too high, and another kind that she had loaded her white fingers with rather too many jewels: in other respects there was really no fault to be found with her appearance.

Her epistolary labours were interrupted every now and then by the entrance of a grave butler, who brought her cards upon a silver tray. Some of them he merely handed to her and then retired; others appeared to call for some response, and this was always given in the same words—"I do not receive." It was not until the afternoon had become evening that this formula was

departed from in favour of a gentleman whose card bore the name "Mr. Mark Chetwode." The butler, who was an observant man, and naturally wanted to find out anything that he could about the foreign lady whose service he had only just entered, fancied that Madame Souravieff's hand trembled slightly as she took this scrap of pasteboard from him; but, however that may have been, there was no tremulousness in her clear voice when she said, "Yes, show him in."

He was shown in accordingly: a slim, pale man, very carefully dressed, who, despite his English name, had much more of the appearance of a Russian than the lady who rose to greet him. His age might have been anything between thirty and forty. His fair hair was cut close to his head, after the foreign fashion, and had no parting; his moustache was waxed; his eyes were of so pale a blue as to be almost colourless; his face (and this was what made many people admire him) had absolutely no expression whatsoever. One cannot help admiring a man who can manage to look a perfect blank without looking in the least a fool.

"What a pretty house!" he exclaimed, glancing appreciatively round the room. "You look quite as if you lived here. But that is a way of yours. If you were planted in the middle of Siberia—as perhaps you may be some fine day—you would make yourself completely at home in a few hours."

Madame Souravieff made a slight grimace. "Is that all you have to say to me?" she asked.

"Oh no; I have so many things to say that the difficulty is to know where to start. Perhaps I had better begin by expressing my surprise and delight at meeting you in England."

"That would be as good a way of beginning as another if it were not absurd. You are never surprised, Mark; and sometimes I think that you are never delighted. Of course I have very good reasons for

being in England, and you know them all. For one thing, it is a free country."

"So they say; but to the best of my knowledge it is not a country in which one can do what one likes."

"At any rate it is a country in which one can say what one likes without being sent to prison."

"Yes—if that is an advantage. You will certainly obtain a good deal of sympathy, and possibly you may be able to collect a good deal of money, if you are careful to avoid specifying what you want it for. Setting politics aside, what motive have you for establishing yourself in Clarges Street?—if one may venture to ask."

"You ought not to require any answer to such a question," said Madame Souravieff.

Mr. Chetwode looked down at his neat little boots, and tapped them meditatively with his cane for a few seconds. "It is dangerous," he said, at length. "One may be watched in London just as well as anywhere else."

"At least we can meet here, and we could not meet at Vienna or Wiesbaden. Besides, what do I care? Let him watch and spy to his heart's content. He can never find out anything wrong about me, because there is nothing wrong to find out."

"It might perhaps be sufficient if he found out that I visited you constantly. I doubt whether he believes in my entire devotion to the cause of Panslavism."

"Nobody could believe easily in your devotion to any cause—or any person," returned Madame Souravieff, rather bitterly. "You almost make me regret that I did not take you at your word long ago and say farewell to you for ever. Most likely that is what you would have preferred. If you are weary of me, be honest and tell me so."

Mr. Chetwode raised his pale blue eyes and smiled faintly. "You know how long I have loved you, Olga," he replied. "I am not weary, I am only hopeless.

And why should you compromise yourself by receiving me? It may get you into great trouble, and it can do no good to either of us. Do you know that when your note reached me I had serious thoughts of paying no attention to it? If I were a rich man the case would be different; but, as far as I can make out, I am very nearly a ruined man. I can do nothing either for you or for your cause, and, really, your wisest plan would be to show me the door."

Madame Souravieff seemed to be a good deal touched by the words, which were coldly enough enunciated. "Poor Mark!" she exclaimed compassionately. "Has your journey been a failure, then? Are your affairs in a worse state than you expected?"

"Oh, I expected them to be in a bad state. For some years past I have had very little to live upon beyond the rent that I received for my house, and now my tenant has departed, and the lawyer tells me that I am not very likely to find a fresh one. He thinks the best thing I can do is to live there myself. It is a cheerful prospect."

"I can't imagine you living in an English province," remarked Madame Souravieff, smiling a little at the idea. "What will you do with yourself? Who will your neighbours be?"

"It is not unlikely that I shall blow my brains out. I have not had the curiosity to inquire who will be my neighbours. The village clergyman, I suppose, and the village doctor. Also a few native landowners—amongst others, the one who now owns the land which ought to be mine."

"I remember that you used to tell me about him. His name is Bligh, and he gained a lawsuit against you, because he was rich enough to bribe the judges. Was not that it?"

"Not exactly. In this country judges are irremovable, which, I am assured, renders them incorruptible. Nevertheless, a rich Englishman is more likely to win a

lawsuit than a poor one, because he can go on applying to Superior Courts. I believe it was in that way that Mr. Bligh obtained a decision against my father, whose means were limited."

"Consequently, Mr. Bligh can hardly be counted as a neighbour."

"I do not precisely love him," replied Mr. Chetwode, with his slow, faint smile; "but if he sees fit to call upon me I shall return his visit. I hear, however, that he is a cripple; so he probably won't call upon me. Let us talk no more of my affairs, which are a most depressing topic of conversation. Tell me about yours. Has the date of the revolution been fixed yet?"

"What revolution?" inquired Madame Souravieff, quickly.

"I am so stupid! I can't at this moment recollect whether it was to take place in Servia or Bulgaria. However, the Vienna people know all about it; so that the persons interested have no doubt received full warning."

"You accuse me of doing dangerous things," observed Madame Souravieff; "don't you think that you yourself sometimes say them? When one has taken such engagements as you have done, one should be a little less reckless."

"I am discretion itself in ordinary company; but with you I feel sure that I am safe. The revolution has my best wishes; only I am rather sceptical as to its coming off, because, as I tell you, the secret is already an open one."

"Mark," exclaimed Madame Souravieff, striking her hands together impatiently, "you are a true Englishman; you have no heart!"

"And everybody here tells me that I am not in the least like an Englishman. They say it regretfully and apologetically, because, of course, it is such a very cruel thing to say of any one; yet they think I ought to

know it, in order that I may try to reform. As for my having no heart, that is a point upon which there can be no better judge than you. If you say that I have none, you are probably right."

Madame Souravieff made no rejoinder for some minutes. "And when do you propose to instal yourself in this remote château of yours?" she asked abruptly, at length.

"I thought of going down to-morrow or the next day."

"Although you know that I came here for—for——"

"For political objects, as I understood."

"Ah, yes; for political objects. I had better stick to them, no doubt. Good-bye then, Mark, since you are so anxious to say good-bye." And she held out her hand to him.

"You are rather unjust, Olga," said Mr. Chetwode, without rising. "If I were anxious to leave London immediately after your arrival, and on account of it, that would be for your sake, not for mine. The Count can do me no sort of harm; it wouldn't injure me in any way if he were to learn that I was in this house from morning to night. But he might injure you very materially by the simple expedient of declining to pay your expenses any longer. You used to be fully alive to that risk."

"Do you mean to tell me that you are going away for my sake, then?"

"Oh no—although if I were able to stay in London I should endeavour to be circumspect for your sake. I am going away for the vulgar but sufficient reason that I can't afford to live here. The necessaries of life are cheap at Abbotsport I am told."

Madame Souravieff looked as if she were strongly tempted to make an offer which it has been agreed from time immemorial that no man who respects himself can accept. Probably knowledge of her visitor's character restrained her from doing so; for she only sighed, and said: "Abbotsport? Is there an hotel at Abbotsport?"

"Certainly not. I doubt whether there is even an inn: though there may be a few alehouses."

"Then I will tell you what I will do. When the London season is over, I will take your house. Will you let your house to me for a few months?"

"I shall be delighted; only in that case, you see, I should have to go away."

"Not necessarily. You could find accommodation in the neighbourhood, if you chose. Have you not an *intendant*—a bailiff—what do you call him? Turn him out of his house for the time; it could easily be done. We must think it over and devise some plan. It is absurd that we should both be in England, yet unable to exchange a word."

"I suppose it is," said Mr. Chetwode, rising; "yet, perhaps, it is even more absurd that we should continue to meet. As I told you before, I am useless and ruined. One should never compromise oneself for a ruined and useless man."

"You are not useless, and I have not compromised myself," declared Madame Souravieff, warmly. "As for ruin, nobody is ever ruined except by his own fault. I want you to be great and powerful, and I think you will be some day. And I want to see you from time to time, because—well, you know why. Try to believe, Mark, that one may be ambitious without being heartless, and that love is not always selfish."

"Dear me!" said Mr. Chetwode, "I thought that was just what I was proving. The unselfishness of love, I mean. I know very little about ambition."

To look at him, one would have imagined that he knew quite as much about that passion as about the other; and, as a matter of fact, he was a man who had always coveted power and had fretted under conditions which had made the attainment of any sort of distinction impossible to him. Born and brought up at St. Petersburg, where his father, after marrying a Russian lady, had settled permanently, he belonged to his mother's

nation in habits and feelings, while remaining an Englishman in name. Thus he had been debarred from any career either in the land of his adoption or that of his origin, and when his parents died he had passed the age at which a fresh start can be made. They left him a moderate fortune, which he got rid of slowly, but steadily, over the card-tables at his club. He had amused himself to the best of his ability, but that was not very well, because, for his misfortune, amusements did not satisfy him. Of late years he had dabbled in political intrigues to an extent which had rendered his departure from St. Petersburg desirable, his chief reason for labouring in the cause of Panslavism being a desire to please Madame Souravieff, with whom he had fallen as much in love as a man of his temperament could. As he walked away from Clarges Street, with both his hands clasped behind his back, he said to himself that he was very tired of Panslavism and of the solemn mystery in which his fellow conspirators were wont to shroud their proceedings. Perhaps he was also beginning to be a little tired of Madame Souravieff; but this he did not say to himself, because there are misgivings which it is always unwise to formulate, lest they should thus resolve themselves into unmistakable realities. For two years past Madame Souravieff had been everything to him: if he were now to lose the excitement by means of which she had been wont to make his somewhat sluggish blood run more quickly in his veins, he would have absolutely nothing left to live for. Life as an impoverished English country gentleman did not seem to him to offer any attractive possibilities: yet that was the kind of life which he had to face, and from which, so far as could be seen, no way of escape lay open to him. Thinking of this and of the forfeited income of certain lands, he forgot himself so far as to scandalize the crossing-sweeper in Berkeley Square by cursing the Bligh family aloud, root and branch.

CHAPTER V.

MARK'S LAWYER

Mr, Chetwode walked away from Madame Souravieff's door with his eyes bent down gloomily upon the pavement, and his mind absorbed in meditation upon subjects with which his immediate surroundings for the time being had nothing to do. He therefore failed to notice a plump, middle-aged, smooth-shaven man of foreign aspect, who was loitering on the opposite side of the street, and who witnessed his exit with an amused smile. This individual's smile expressed relief as well as amusement; because he had been walking up and down Clarges Street for a long time, and few duties are so fatiguing as that of mounting guard. However, he was being handsomely paid for his work, which is always a consolation, and he was earning his pay by strict attention to duty, which is a greater consolation still to the scrupulous mind. He glanced at his watch, sighed comfortably, and murmured: "Enough for one day! Fifteen carriages, of which the greater part have coronets upon them; the society of London accepts Madame. No one is admitted until nearly six o'clock, when the suspected one presents himself. He enters, and emerges at the end of half an hour with the air of one who has wasted his time. But that is a detail which need not be mentioned in the report. If I am unable to watch the house continuously, that is due to no fault of mine, but to the habits of these English, who are not *flâneurs*. One cannot walk two or three times up and down a London street without making oneself conspicuous; although on this occasion I have been fortunate enough to escape notice."

He had not been so fortunate in this respect as he supposed, for while he had been thus meditating and

biting the end off a very long cigar, Madame Souravieff, who had moved to the window, had caught sight of him.

"What insolence!" she exclaimed, and immediately rang the bell.

The grave butler who presently appeared in answer to this summons, was surprised and somewhat scandalized by the order which he received. "On the other side of the street there is a fat man who is lighting a cigar. Run across and tell him to come here at once; I want to speak to him."

To suppose that a respectable English upper servant, who had lived in the very best families, would consent to "run" anywhere—and without his hat too—showed an ignorance of all propriety which could only be pardoned in a foreigner. The butler, of course, did no such thing; but he despatched a subordinate, who overtook the stout stranger and duly delivered the message.

The stout stranger did not look disconcerted. He smiled, glanced regretfully at his cigar, then carefully cut the lighted end off it and replaced it in his pocket. "I am at the orders of Madame la Comtesse," said he, in very fair English.

And indeed nothing could have been more respectful than the bow with which he greeted Madame Souravieff, when that lady swept down into the dining-room where he had been requested to wait for her, and fixed a pair of angry eyes upon him. "What does this mean, Victor?" she asked in French.

The stout man shrugged his shoulders, and spread out his hands. "Madame la Comtesse," he replied, "must be aware that I have no choice but to do my duty and obey the orders that are given to me."

"Is it the duty of a valet to be a spy?" Madame Souravieff inquired.

"*Mon Dieu*, Madame, we may say that it is the duty of every poor man to lay by a little money in anticipation of his old age. When Monsieur le Comte commands me to proceed to London for a certain

purpose, and not only pays all my expenses, but promises me three napoleons as well, in addition to my ordinary wages, I find myself in the impossibility of refusing. The more so because I am persuaded that I might remain here for months without making any revelation of importance."

"You may certainly count upon that," returned Madame Souravieff, disdainfully. "At the same time it is not agreeable to me to be watched, and I do not know why I should submit to such an insult."

"With permission, Madame la Comtesse, how can you help it? For the rest, one must admit, the Monsieur le Comte has reason to be disquieted. Monsieur desires to return to Russia as soon as his health may permit, and he is naturally anxious that he should not be coldly received at Court. It is said that Madame la Comtesse is pursuing a policy which is not that of His Majesty the Czar."

"Ah, bah! You were not sent here to report upon matters of policy, my good Victor. My political objects, of which I make no secret, are well known to Monsieur le Comte, and are, perhaps, less objectionable to His Majesty than is pretended. What is hoped for is that you may furnish evidence which will be instrumental in bringing about a divorce; but such evidence you never will be able to give, unless you perjure yourself. And you know that as well as anybody."

The valet replied that Madame la Comtesse was a thousand times right. Nevertheless, she would understand that he must make his report.

"No doubt. Report then all that you have seen and all that you have not seen. You may even give a report of this interview, if you choose. I have nothing to conceal."

The man smiled deferentially. "Am I to say that Mr. Chetwode was here this afternoon, and that he was the only person whom Madame deigned to admit?" he inquired.

"I have already told you that you are at liberty to report anything and everything, true or untrue."

"I only ventured to ask the question, because I feared that it might not be agreeable to Madame la Comtesse to be summoned back to Germany. Have I permission to mention Monsieur's instructions to me?"

Madame Souravieff nodded.

"He said—I beg pardon for repeating such words—he said, 'I will not be disgraced. If you find that she has gone to England in order to meet Mr. Chetwode you will let me know, and I will at once cease remitting money to her. Detestable'—I quote him textually—'detestable though her company is to me, I prefer even that to being made a laughing-stock.'"

Now Madame Souravieff did not mind being told that her company was detestable to her husband, because she knew that it was so, and had, indeed, always endeavoured to make it so; but she had no private fortune, and to be recalled from London to the German baths at which her husband was then sojourning would not have suited her at all. Therefore, without any superfluous delicacy, she drew her purse from her pocket and handed a couple of bank-notes to her interlocutor, to whom she observed briefly: "You have not seen Mr. Chetwode."

The valet took the notes and bowed profoundly. "I am convinced of it," said he. "There was a gentleman somewhat resembling Mr. Chetwode who entered the house a short time ago; but I could not be sure of recognizing him, and now that Madame la Comtesse tells me that it was not he, all doubt is at an end. For the rest, Madame la Comtesse knows that I am, as ever, devoted to her interests. If I can be in any way useful——"

Madame Souravieff, who during this colloquy had been standing beside the dining-table, drummed upon it for a few seconds with her white fingers, while she

looked over the man's head. "And Monsieur's health?" she asked abruptly, at length.

"Excellent, Madame. A little gout—a little indigestion—which are yielding to the action of the waters. Monsieur counts upon returning to St. Petersburg before the winter."

"Well," said Madame Souravieff, with an impatient sigh, "you can go now. I am sure that I may rely upon your fidelity, because it must be delightful to be paid both for saying things and for leaving them unsaid. Besides, you are now in my power. In the event of any unpleasantness arising, I should not hesitate for a moment to tell Monsieur that I had bribed you, and he would certainly believe me."

When Madame Souravieff was left alone, she began to laugh. She had a low, musical laugh, which was rightly considered to be one of her charms. "I was perhaps too quick," she murmured; "whatever Boris may have said, he is not likely to have said that. He would rather be despised than worried. Yet he is so malicious that he might be capable of putting up with my society if he knew how very much I should hate to leave England just now. After all, the best way is to pay Victor, and it is amusing to think that Boris provides the money. At this she laughed again; for she had a certain mischievous, childish sense of humour, which also was one of her charms.

However, she became grave and pensive while her maid was bedecking her for the dinner-party which she had promised to attend, and at which she expected to meet some eminent politicians. She was a woman of the world, whose worldliness was tempered by a large admixture of enthusiasm and romance. Of human nature in the abstract she had formed a tolerably accurate estimate, having had sufficient opportunity of so doing: but it was not in her power to apply this estimate to individuals, and thus she was unfitted for success either in public or in private life. Loving Mark

Chetwode as she did, with a perfectly disinterested love, she was obliged to clothe him in her thoughts with attributes which her reason told her that he did not possess; so that the memory of what he had said and done often gave her some anxious moments. Her temperament, however, was so far a fortunate and happy one, that if anything worried her she could almost always stop thinking about it; and she ceased to think about Mark very soon after she had seated herself in her carriage, and was being driven at a sharp trot towards Berkeley Square, where Lord Queensferry, with whom she had been invited to dine, resided.

Lord Queensferry was a man of over forty, who still looked young, and was always spoken of as being so. He was a Whig, and liked to be called a Radical; he was a sportsman, though scarcely a keen one; and he had made some smart speeches both in the House of Lords and upon the platform. Possibly he might never have risen to Cabinet rank if he had not been so very rich; but whatever the reason of it may have been, he had held high offices, and was sure to hold them again some day. At present he was in Opposition, which left him free to amuse himself and others by delivering inflammatory harangues every now and then, by consorting with queer people, and by asking Madame Souravieff to dinner.

That lady on being shown into the great drawing-room at Queensferry House, met with a very cordial reception from her host and hostess, and found herself in highly distinguished company. The guests were not numerous, but they were celebrated, and Madame Souravieff had not been three minutes in the room before she perceived that she herself was, for the time being, the chief celebrity amongst them. They all looked at her, they were all anxious to be introduced to her, and it was evident that they all thought her a remarkably handsome woman. This pleased her

immensely, for she loved admiration, and delighted in being recognized as a factor in contemporary politics. But she knew better than to begin talking of politics at once. While dinner was going on she contented herself with asking many questions about English life and manners, and confessing to a strong affection for English people.

"I should like to be an Englishwoman," she remarked ingenuously, during a pause in the general conversation; "but since that cannot be, I must try to be a good Russian. It is perhaps the next best thing."

Everybody thought her very nice and very clever, and in truth she managed to say some clever things in an unaffected way. She was, at all events, clever enough to know that English people are easily bored, and that nothing bores them quite so much as enthusiasm in private life. Therefore she kept a curb upon herself until her opportunity arrived.

This was soon after dinner, when the venerable statesman whose countenance and support she specially coveted approached her and seated himself upon the sofa by her side. He crossed his legs, folded his hands, smiled benignly, and said: "Now, Madame Souravieff, you must tell me all about Bulgaria."

"Ah," she replied, "what can I tell you that you do not already know? You are one of those marvellous people who know everything."

The great man looked pleased, although he felt bound to disclaim the omniscience ascribed to him. When he was out of office he was compelled, he said, to derive his information from the newspapers, like the rest of the public, and such information was not always to be relied upon.

"Oh, the newspapers!" exclaimed Madame Souravieff, with a disdainful shrug of her shoulders. "I have always been accustomed to read the English newspapers, and since I have been in London I have done so with additional interest. They are very nicely printed

—one must render them that justice—but I have often been obliged to rub my eyes in order to convince myself that the words which I seemed to see were actually there. The way in which they treat General Kaulbars, the most charming, the most inoffensive, the most placable man in the world, is enough to make any one doubt their good faith. Yet I really believe that they are honest. The English people are no doubt stupid and easily taken in, but they are honest, and that is why I love them."

"We are certainly honest," said the statesman.

"Nevertheless you are, if I may be allowed to say so, curiously prejudiced. Your one idea is that Russia wants Constantinople and must be kept out of it. You will not believe that Bulgaria is in the hands of a gang of adventurers, and that the heart of the people is—as indeed it must be—with us. You can't, or you won't, understand that it is we who have given freedom to Bulgaria, that the Bulgarians are our brothers by race and by creed, and that there is such a thing as gratitude even in politics."

"We may admit all that and yet not wish to see you at Constantinople, Madame Souravieff."

"But can you prevent us from going there eventually? Have you any alternative policy? I am only a woman, I have no pretensions to statecraft; still I can see that right is might, not might right. It is a conflict between Christianity and infidelity, and though Europe may choose to take the losing side and to close her eyes, and may retard the inevitable for many years to come, yet at last Christianity must conquer, as it always has conquered. The Cross will be raised again upon the dome of St. Sophia—I am as certain of it as I am of my own existence—the only question is whether this shall be done with or against the will of Christendom."

She spoke with a great deal of animation, and perhaps her beauty and her earnestness may have impressed

her auditor, who remarked, "I, at least, shall hardly be accused of entertaining any sentiments of tenderness for the Turks."

"Nor for us either, I am afraid. Ah, if you only understood us and would trust us! There are but two great races in the world, the Anglo-Saxon and the Slav. Let them be friends, instead of enemies, and the peace and happiness of mankind is assured. Is it too much to hope for such an understanding?"

Whether this was or was not an extravagantly sanguine expectation, she was encouraged to enlarge upon it, and the succeeding half-hour was made extremely pleasant to her. By the end of that time the room was full of people, for Lady Queensferry was holding a great reception, to which she had invited every man and woman whose name appeared in her visiting-book. Amongst them were many persons who wished to be recognized by Madame Souravieff's interlocutor, and amongst them, too, was a certain obscure (comparatively obscure) solicitor who, for reasons of his own, was anxious to make Madame Souravieff's acquaintance.

He attained his object without any difficulty, and she smiled with her usual graciousness when the little chubby, grey-headed man, who was introduced to her as "Mr. Wingfield," drew his heels together and made her a profound bow, though she wondered who Mr. Wingfield might be and what he could have to say to her.

He had plenty to say to her about political matters, and was much less reserved than the great statesman had been. He quite saw the force of all her arguments; he professed himself a Liberal—a moderate Liberal—and was willing to allow that the British public might have been wholly misled as to the state of affairs in the Balkan provinces. But of course she understood perfectly well that he only reached his point when he remarked casually: "A great friend and client

of mine, who, I believe, is also a friend of yours, is deeply interested in the Eastern question. I mean poor young Chetwode."

"Why do you call him poor?" Madame Souravieff inquired.

"Because, unfortunately, he is very poor indeed. He seems to have spent nearly the whole of his fortune —whether in support of revolutionary committees or not, of course, I can't say—and the income arising from the small extent of property which still remains to him in this country can hardly do more than keep the big house which stands upon it in repair."

"He was defrauded of a part of his property by a neighbour of his, was he not?" asked Madame Souravieff.

The lawyer laughed.

"Oh, well, his father used to say so, and I believe he himself has some such idea. As a matter of fact, old Mr. Bligh, the father of Mark's present neighbour, held mortgages and foreclosed. Old Mr. Bligh may not have been very friendly or forbearing; but he was certainly within his right. However, the transfer of the land has left a great deal of bitter feeling, which is to be regretted. In your wide experience you must have met with many queer types of humanity, Madame Souravieff: did you ever happen to come across a romantic lawyer before?"

"Frequently," answered Madame Souravieff, smiling. "Why not?"

"Well, perhaps they are more common in Russia than they are in England. Anyhow, I have always regarded myself as singular in that respect. It is an amiable weakness which I can't help, and which, after all, harms nobody. Lately I have been beguiling my leisure moments by constructing a romantic plot, of which Mark Chetwode is the hero and Mr. Bligh's only daughter the heroine. I must tell you that Mr. Bligh is a very rich man, and that his daughter will certainly

inherit a considerable fortune from him, if she does not inherit the whole of his landed property."

"Is she pretty?" asked Madame Souravieff, quickly.

"I believe she is not plain," said the astute solicitor; "but one must not be too exacting in such cases."

He looked sharply, as he spoke, at the Russian lady, who preserved an unruffled exterior. "I hope," said she musingly, "that your romance may become a reality. It would be a very good thing."

"Yes, yes," returned Mr. Wingfield, nodding his head; "it would be a good thing. A good thing for Mark, and, perhaps, not a very bad thing for the revolutionary committees."

"Oh, I know nothing about revolutionary committees," Madame Souravieff declared; "it is only from the newspapers that I hear of their existence. Still, there is no cause in the world that can be kept going without funds, and you are quite right in guessing that Mr. Chetwode will be more valuable to us as a rich man than as an impoverished one."

She turned away with a little nod of dismissal, leaving Mr. Wingfield in some doubt as to whether she would prove to be an ally or an opponent of his. "But I am pretty sure of one thing," he reflected; "I am pretty sure that Mark wants to be rid of her."

CHAPTER VI.

ARCHIE GOES OUT FISHING

"LOWNDES brought me a bit of news this morning," remarked Mr. Bligh, addressing the four persons who were seated at luncheon round the oval table.

"I know what it is," exclaimed Miss Skipwith, excitedly; "I have been expecting it for weeks past. The Bishop has forbidden him to use the eastward

position, and I must say that I think the Bishop is perfectly right. I do hope Mr. Lowndes will not be so silly as to go on defying the law."

"Oh, I fancy he will," answered her brother-in-law, placidly. "The Bishop hasn't been so silly—or so wise, which is it?—as you imagine. Lowndes's news was of a less important kind. It is only that young Mark Chetwode is coming home."

"Coming to live at Upton Chetwode, do you mean?" asked Cicely eagerly. "I call that very important indeed. Is he really going to settle there, or is he only coming down until he can find another tenant?"

"That Lowndes didn't know," answered Mr. Bligh. "Probably Chetwode would be glad to let the place again if he could; but it isn't very lettable, and he can't afford to leave it empty. The chances are that he will have to occupy it himself for a good many years to come."

"Poor devil!" ejaculated Morton, compassionately.

"You wouldn't like to be situated as he is, would you?" asked his father, with a smile.

The heir-apparent took some trouble to make his meaning clear. Certainly he would not care to be in Mark Chetwode's shoes, because, in his opinion, nothing could be more wretched than to live in a large house surrounded by lands which had passed away from one's family, and to be reminded at every turn that one represented a worn-out, poverty-stricken race. He did not in the least believe that the day of territorial influence and usefulness had gone by; only landowners who depended for an income on their land were now an anachronism. They couldn't live upon such an income, much less help others out of it. "Look at this property, for instance," he added. "It is a well-managed property. I believe; but if it were mine I would much rather sell it at once than attempt to keep things going upon the rents that I could squeeze out of my tenants."

"I trust that you will never be reduced to so painful a necessity," said Mr. Bligh, with such a slight twinkle in his eyes that nobody noticed it.

"I remember that I used to hear vague rumours about the Chetwodes when I was a boy," remarked Archie. "The Abbotsport people shook their heads over them, and doubted whether they weren't traitors to their Queen and country. Didn't they stay in Russia all through the Crimean War?"

"I believe so," answered Mr. Bligh; "but as Mark was not born at that time we must not hold him responsible. I daresay you recollect old Mr. and Mrs. Morant, who lived at Upton Chetwode for many years. They are both dead now, and I suppose it isn't easy to find anybody who would care to take such a large house, with nothing attached to it beyond the park and a few acres of woodland."

"There are pheasants in the woods," said Cicely, "and there might be many more at the cost of a little money and trouble. Upton Chetwode is a dear old place, which must not be allowed to fall into ruins. I shall seize the first opportunity of telling Mr. Chetwode that it is his duty to take up his abode there."

"You have such a convincing way of putting things, my dear," observed her father, "that I am quite sure he would see his duty at once, if only a chance of pointing it out to him were given you. Unfortunately, there is very little prospect of your getting that chance, because I am afraid he has been taught to regard us as hereditary enemies."

"Oh, but he must not be so ridiculous," Cicely declared, decisively. "Old Mr. Wingfield told me all about that when he was down here last year, and he himself said that it was perfect nonsense. The Chetwodes couldn't have kept their property in any case; and they ought to be thankful that it wasn't grabbed by some horrid old Jew or other. Besides, if ever he

has money enough to buy it back I am sure we shall be delighted to let him have it."

"Shall we, indeed?" said Mr. Bligh, laughing. "I was not aware of that; but since you say so no doubt it is so."

Morton glanced at his sister from beneath his lowered eyelids, and remarked: "Little girls shouldn't be so cock-sure of other people's intentions."

This brought about an uncomfortable period of silence, soon after which the company dispersed. Mr. Bligh was wheeled away to the library; Miss Skipwith, murmuring something about having letters to write, fluttered after him towards the sitting-room which was appropriated to her especial use; and Morton, with a cigar in his mouth and his hands in his pockets, made for the smoking-room.

"How long," asked Archie, when he was left alone with his cousin, "do you suppose that your dear brother means to stay here?"

She shook her head rather despondently. "I think he is very tired of us," she replied, "but then, unhappily, we have not been able to conceal our desire for his departure. Perhaps if we all went down on our knees and implored him to remain with us he might fly."

Archie did not seem disposed to treat the matter in so light a spirit. "The man is simply intolerable!" he declared. "I have put up with him for three days, and in spite of great provocation I have behaved to him, I really must say, like an angel—for your sake."

"Thank you," said Cicely, with a little bow.

"Well, you asked me to be civil to him, you know. But I don't think I can stand his perpetual impertinence to you much longer."

"If I can stand it I should think you might. I really don't mind what you call his impertinence; the only thing that distresses me is that I am afraid his being in the house worries my father. However, it can't be

helped, and there's no use in talking about it. What are you going to do this afternoon? Would you like to be taken out fishing with me and Bobby Dare? Bobby wrote to me this morning to say that he had hired a boat of old Coppard (who, by the way, must have borrowed it, for he hasn't one of his own), and it would be an act of charity if we were to make use of it."

"Of charity to Dare or to Mr. Coppard?" inquired Archie.

"Well, to both, perhaps," answered the girl, laughing. "Besides, it might help to amuse you—which is more to the purpose."

Archie was not quite sure that it would amuse him to put out to sea; because the wind was in the east, and, as everybody knows, the wind cannot blow from that quarter in the English Channel, be it never so softly, without raising a long swell, which is apt to be disconcerting to landsmen. But he was not going to miss the chance of spending several hours in Cicely's society; still less was he inclined to leave her for several hours in the society of Bobby Dare.

Presently, therefore, the two young people set forth for the village, and Morton, who espied them from the smoking-room window, muttered: "Hang the fellow! he ought to be ashamed of himself. If he had the feelings of a gentleman he would understand that he has no alternative but to clear out and not show his face here again until a certain event has taken place. He may come back then, and welcome."

But Archie was free from any of the scruples which, according to this rigid moralist, ought to have disturbed him, because—incredible though that would have seemed to the rigid moralist—he was free from any suspicion of their appropriateness. He adored Cicely, and that was all that he thought about in connection with her. He did not believe his uncle to be dying; he had never asked himself what would happen when his uncle died, or supposed that it was in contemplation to put

him in Morton's place. All his life he had had a sufficiency of money, and the idea of being wealthy would not have been especially attractive to him, even if it had entered his head. What chiefly preoccupied him just now was an uneasy feeling of jealousy of Bobby Dare, which, as almost anybody could have told him, was a perfectly absurd sentiment to harbour. It was well known in the neighbourhood of Abbotsport that Miss Bligh held her head very high indeed, and that there was little likelihood of her throwing herself away upon the younger son of a baronet whose rent roll, probably, did not exceed four thousand pounds a year. But the Abbotsport estimate of Miss Bligh was unknown to Archie; nor, perhaps, had it been revealed to him, would he have recognized its accuracy.

"What sort of a chap has Dare developed into?" he asked her while they were walking at a brisk pace across the park; and when she replied, carelessly, "Oh, rather a nice, manly boy," he felt reassured. He himself had not yet passed the age of those—*fortunatos nimium*—who can't hear themselves described as boys without considering that they have been insulted; so he was quite prepared to extend the hand of tolerant good-fellowship to his old acquaintance, Lieutenant Dare, R.N., who had been walking impatiently up and down the jetty for a good half-hour before the arrival of Cicely and her escort.

Bobby Dare, for his part, was not precisely overjoyed to see the young Lancer, for whose appearance he had not been prepared; but as he was a thoroughly kind-hearted and good-natured little fellow, he said everything that was polite, and was even considerate enough to mention that there was a bit of a lop outside.

"I know Miss Bligh doesn't care," he said, "she's as good a sailor as I am. But there are a good many people who cannot stand an easterly swell."

Archie at once gave it to be understood that he was

not one of the unfortunates alluded to; and from the bottom of his heart he hoped he was not. At all events he would have died rather than retreat at the eleventh hour, and he seated himself in the boat with a grim determination that if by any means the mind could be made to dominate the body he would not disgrace himself.

Now there is no doubt but that the mind can dominate the body to a certain extent and within certain limits. Any ordinary person, by putting forth the full strength of his will, may keep himself for a time from fainting or from being sea-sick; but even an extraordinary person is bound to be vanquished at length. In the former case the colours have to be hauled down when everything becomes black; in the latter defeat is indicated by symptoms upon which it is needless to dwell. Archie was well acquainted with them, and was thankful that he did not experience them during the first half-hour that he spent on board the *Rover*. Nevertheless, he was not altogether happy. There was very little wind, but the ebbing tide was raising a nasty cross sea, over which the boat plunged and rolled uncomfortably; he was afraid that he was looking rather green, and he felt incapable of keeping up conversation. Over the side he was dangling a line with which old Coppard had provided him; although nobody knew better than old Coppard that there was not the remotest prospect of any fish being caught under existing circumstances. But after all, fishing of that kind is never a very exciting form of sport, and in truth neither Bobby Dare nor Cicely cared a straw whether they were successful or not. Cicely was enjoying herself. She loved the sea; perhaps, too, she did not dislike the humble worship of her neighbour, who, with the tiller under his arm, was looking unspeakable things at her. She ignored the unspeakable things, but listened willingly to those which were spoken, and displayed a kindly interest in

what Bobby told her about his prospects. He had been through a course of gunnery instruction; he hoped soon to be afloat again; he confessed that he did not care much about a prolonged leave, and said with something of a sigh, that his profession was all he had to live for. His wooing could hardly be called a wooing, because it started with the assumption that there was no hope for him (which is a very fatal assumption to start with); yet he obtained a measure of compassion and gratitude which his rival noted with vexation. It was not pleasant to hear Cicely saying that if she had been a man she would certainly have been a sailor; it was still less pleasant to catch fragments of confidential communications about her brother, which she thought fit to make to one who was in no way concerned with her family affairs; and what was worst of all was to be treated as non-existent. Archie was not accustomed to be so treated; he did not appreciate the delicacy which deterred his cousin from looking at him or addressing him; and so, as time went on, his physical uneasiness became complicated by a sharp attack of jealousy and ill-temper.

Meanwhile, Coppard, who had been sitting in the bows, with his elbows on his knees, and had been keeping very quiet (for he was not sure whether Miss Cicely had forgiven him yet) was also growing uneasy. Coppard knew that the wind was shifting—had, indeed, already shifted a point or two to the southward. Furthermore, he knew that it was going to blow, and had private misgivings which he felt bound at last to express.

"What should you say to gettin' about, sir?" he asked, deferentially. "'Tis working up rather ugly to the west'ard, and we may get more of it than we want presently."

Bobby rose and took a quick survey of the horizon. "Yes, there's a change of weather coming," he agreed, "but I expect we shall be all right until after sunset."

What do you think, Miss Bligh? Do you want to go back?"

Cicely did not want to go back, but she did think that the sky looked threatening. After a momentary hesitation, she referred the question to her cousin. "Have you had enough of it, Archie?"

Thereupon Mr. Coppard was ill-advised and ill-mannered enough to chuckle. "More'n enough, Miss, you may depend!" answered he, before Archie could open his lips. Then it was that Archie was impelled to declare promptly and mendaciously that for his part he didn't care if they stayed out till midnight. Now this, little as he supposed it, was by no means an impossible contingency. The south-west wind defied precedent, as it sometimes will, by rising, first in puffs, then with steadily increasing force, a good hour before its proper time, and soon the *Rover* was running before it towards Abbotsport without any certainty of being able to make that haven. The harbour, it is true, was protected by a breakwater, which Mr. Bligh had caused to be constructed, but then this breakwater had for years past been causing the gradual formation of a bar, and under certain conditions of tide and wind this bar was an obstacle which had to be taken into account."

"I doubt we sha'n't do it, sir," said Coppard to the man at the helm.

"Oh, we shall do it right enough," returned the latter, who had himself been peering somewhat anxiously across the curling waves ahead; "there ought to be plenty of water."

"So there did, sir; you never spoke a truer word. But maybe there ain't, you see. 'Tis nigh upon low water now, and the sea setting straight in."

"Well, but what are we to do if we can't cross the bar, Coppard?" Cicely inquired.

Coppard had to confess that in that case there would be nothing for it but to stand out to sea again and await

the turn of the tide. This, he hastened to add, would involve no sort of risk; the *Rover* would make nothing of far worse weather than they were likely to see that evening. Only, to be sure, they might get a wetting.

"Hang it all, man!" exclaimed Archie, with a sudden outburst of irritation, "if you knew there was going to be any difficulty about getting into harbour, why did you keep us out so long? I suppose the fact is that you're paid by time."

He might have brought many more injurious accusations without giving half so much offence. The only excuse for him was that he was afraid neither Cicely nor Bobby would much mind being exposed to the buffeting of the waves for another two or three hours, whereas he knew for certain that he himself must very shortly collapse.

Coppard behaved extremely well. For a moment he scowled angrily at the young man, but he controlled himself and only answered: "I'll take 'ee in, sir, if so be as it can be done. I don't want Miss Cicely to be put to no inconvenience."

So they kept on their course, while a little group of persons who were watching them from the jetty hoped that they might be in time, but had doubts about it.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE ALIEN

"YOUR view, then," said Mark Chetwode, "is that I must grin and bear it?"

He was sitting in the City office of Mr. Wingfield, whither he had betaken himself in order to consult his family solicitor about certain matters of business, the discussion of which had gradually led to a topic very

near his heart—that, namely, of the transfer of a part of his hereditary possessions to Mr. Bligh.

"My dear sir," answered the little lawyer, folding his hands and smiling amiably, "what other view could a sensible being take? Nobody asks you to grin, but as for bearing it—well, I suppose we must all bear what can't be helped. Your poor father, I know, persisted in thinking that he had been defrauded, but that, if I may be allowed to say so, was very great nonsense. He mortgaged his land, he was unable for a considerable time to pay the interest due, and then the mortgagee foreclosed. You may be as angry as you please with the mortgagee, but I really don't see how you can imagine that you have any legal claim against him. For the matter of that, I confess that I don't see much sense in being angry with him either."

Mark Chetwode stroked his moustache and fixed his colourless eyes upon Mr. Wingfield. "I am very seldom angry," said he; "only I should have thought that in this country, where justice is supposed to reign supreme, a man would have been allowed some chance of redeeming his own. My father, as you know, could have done that, if time had been given him."

"Your theory," observed the lawyer, with a smile, "favours an insecurity of title which would hardly be to the public advantage. Not that it matters much. Your father, you say, could have freed the estate; but could you do so?"

"No, because I have been a fool, and have squandered my patrimony. That, however, does not prevent me from regarding Mr. Bligh as a licensed robber. I am unreasonable, if you choose, but that is how I feel."

"Well now," said the lawyer, persuasively, "I wouldn't feel in that way about it if I were you; I wouldn't really. It's a little bit absurd, you know, and I am sure that you are no lover of absurdity. You have a fancy—a very natural and very creditable fancy—for recovering the land which once belonged to

your family. But there are more ways than one of doing that. Or, to be strictly accurate, there is only one way; and I should think that it would be by no means an unpleasant one. Mr. Bligh, who won't live much longer, has a daughter; and from all that I hear his daughter has an excellent chance of being his heiress."

"He has a son, too, hasn't he?"

"Yes, but his son is a black sheep. Not an ordinary black sheep, who might be expected to turn more or less white on acquiring wealth and responsibility, but one of a deep and permanent dye. Morton Bligh has advertised himself, too, as a Radical. Also he is a free-thinker, who has translated the freedom of his thoughts into action after a fashion which shows that he has the courage of his opinions. There is no saying what mischief a fellow like that might not work in such a place as Abbotsport, where feudal traditions still linger. His father, who is a conscientious Tory, is afraid of his son and would like to disinherit him. He is not fond of his son and he adores his daughter. His present scheme, if I am correctly informed, is to disinherit the son in favour of the daughter, always supposing he can get the daughter to marry a nephew of his, a subaltern in a cavalry regiment. But the young lady is said to be self-willed; and for my own part I should imagine that a young lady's first cousin would always start rather heavily handicapped."

"Oh, I see. You would advise me to enter myself against the subaltern?"

"Why not? It would be an honourable and satisfactory method of attaining your object."

Mark Chetwode laughed. He had a singularly dreary laugh.

"I am much obliged to you," he said, "but there are reasons which I am afraid would make it impossible for me to adopt your suggestion."

Mr. Wingfield knew a great deal better than to inquire what those reasons might be. He only remarked,

after a pause, during which he had glanced at some of the letters which were lying upon his table: "By the way, I met your friend, Madame Souravieff, at Lord Queensferry's the other night. Lord Queensferry, who is a client of mine, asks me to his big crushes, and in that way I get occasional glimpses of celebrities. Madame Souravieff is a celebrity, isn't she? Anyhow, she is a very clever woman."

"Did you think so?" returned Mark, languidly. "What did she talk about to you?"

"Oh, not much about politics; she probably understood that my political opinions were of no great importance to anybody. I think we talked more about you than about anything else. And she quite agreed with me that you could not do better than marry Miss Bligh." Mr. Wingfield, as he made this assertion, peeped from under his eyelids at his visitor, whose impassive countenance did not change. The lawyer, however, was a close observer, and he thought that he detected an almost imperceptible movement, which could not be called a start, yet might be taken as an equivalent to one, on the part of the younger man.

Mark said: "That was generous of her, because she doesn't as a rule like her friends to marry."

The subject was not pursued further, and soon afterwards he took his leave. He walked meditatively for some distance down the street, and the upshot of his meditations was that he said to himself, "I don't believe it." As a matter of fact he seldom believed in anybody or anything, experience having convinced him that most things and people are false. Still it seemed worth while to proceed to Clarges Street with a view to making investigations; so he hailed a hansom and had himself driven to Madame Souravieff's door.

That lady was at home and was glad to see him, or at all events professed to be so.

"I didn't expect you to-day," she said; "you told me you wouldn't be able to come."

"I didn't think I should be able to come," he said; "I had to go and hold a conference with my old solicitor, Mr. Wingfield, and I imagined that he would detain me longer than he did. As it happened, our conference was brief and unsatisfactory. He assured me that I had nothing at all to complain about, that the property which was once ours now belonged quite legitimately to Mr. Bligh, and that if I wanted to get it back again I had better begin paying my addresses to Mr. Bligh's daughter, who, it seems, is not unlikely to be his successor before long."

Madame Souravieff nodded. "Yes, that is what he said to me," she observed. "Did he tell you that we had met at Lord Queensferry's?"

"He did, and he added that you approved of this scheme. I had just a shade of difficulty in believing him."

A very slow and faint flush overspread Madame Souravieff's cheeks. She looked down at the carpet, which she was tapping softly with her foot. Her feet were small and well shaped, and her shoes always fitted perfectly.

"Do you consider me a selfish woman?" she asked, raising her eyes suddenly.

"I do not pretend to understand women," Mark replied. "All I am sure about in dealing with them is that one can never be sure of them."

It was not a very polite speech, but it did not seem to displease Madame Souravieff, who smiled. "Actually a little suspicion of jealousy?" she asked, with lifted eyebrows.

"At the risk of seeming unpardonably vain, I must own that I did not think you would wish me to marry."

He looked piqued, and the truth was that he felt so, although he was more than half conscious of longing for a release which only Madame Souravieff could give him.

How far she read his thought is uncertain, for the benefit of a doubt is what no human being has ever

been able to refuse to him or herself. But she said gently:

"I think you are right; I think you don't understand women. When we love we love less selfishly than you do. We are wise or foolish; it doesn't matter, because we can't help ourselves; we are made like that. I want you to be happy, I want you to be rich, and I know you well enough to know that you can never be happy unless you are rich." She added with a deep sigh: "And the Count will live for ever. He will always have the gout; but that will not prevent him from hobbling after my coffin when I am laid in my grave. He will make a point of being at the ceremony; he is a great stickler for etiquette, as you know."

Mark shrugged his shoulders. "You really desire then that I should raise another barrier between us?"

"My friend, when we have already a stone wall between us which we cannot climb, it signifies very little whether you erect a second one beyond it or not. If there were any hope—but there is no hope! Marry your heiress; it is not I who shall forbid you. Only," she added, with an abrupt laugh, which had a certain ring of fierceness in it, "do not permit yourself to fall in love with her."

"I possess guarantees against that danger," said Mark.

He remained another half-hour with the woman whom he had once adored, and whom, perhaps, he still loved. She had many qualities which were easily enough understood, but she had others which were incomprehensible save to enthusiasts, and there never lived a less enthusiastic man than Mark Chetwode.

When they parted it was with the mutual knowledge that they would meet no more for some time to come. He was going to his long deserted home, and she was compelled, or thought herself compelled, to remain in London. But they were to write to one another

frequently, and, when the season should be more advanced, perhaps she might carry out that plan of renting his house from him.

"In the meantime," were her last words, "try to make yourself very agreeable to the heiress. You can be very agreeable when you please; one must do you that justice."

"I suppose," said Mark, as he walked away, "that she is really unselfish. It is strange; but it seems to be the truth. After all, she has common sense on her side. It is time to conclude a romance which has no prospect of reaching any reasonable conclusion. Perhaps that is what she means, though she doesn't like to say it in so many words."

As to Mr. Wingfield's project, in which she had acquiesced with such surprising readiness, he did not trouble himself to consider it seriously. He was not a vain man; he did not suppose—as they apparently did—that the heiress would be quite pleased to marry him if he did her the honour to propose to her; moreover, such a method of regaining the possessions of his forefathers would have been repugnant to him. Not that he had any sort of scruple about making a marriage of convenience, but he had been brought up to regard the Blighs as his enemies; he had been accustomed to hold them as in some undefined way responsible for the many failures of his life, and for his present impecunious condition. He hated the very sound of their name, and was convinced that he should hate them individually if ever he were brought into contact with them.

On the following day he reached Upton Chetwode, and saw for the first time the beautiful old house of which the exterior had been made familiar to him by photographs. It was undeniably a beautiful old house, dating almost throughout from the sixteenth century, standing (as beautiful old houses so seldom do) upon a height, surrounded by lawns and flower-beds, beyond which an expanse of fairly well-timbered park fell gradually away

to the edge of the chalk cliffs. But it was scarcely an inviting or cheerful dwelling-place for a lonely man. The lawns were unmown; the flower-beds were bare; the gravel walks evidently had not been weeded for a very long time; the few rooms which had been opened for the reception of the owner were dark, gloomy, deserted-looking, and had a damp, musty smell. As Mark stood gazing out of one of the mullioned windows at his shrunken territory and at the prospect of grey sea and sky which was discernible in the waning light of a chill spring evening, he shuddered and murmured under his breath: "A garret in Paris would be better than this."

Dinner was served for him presently in the great silent dining-room, and a very bad dinner it was. He had engaged no servants; the old couple who, with their daughter, had been living in the house since the departure of the last tenant, would, he presumed, be capable of providing for his modest wants. His French valet waited upon him, and enlivened the proceedings from time to time by a heartrending sigh. All this was bad enough, but going to bed was a great deal worse. It was a positive fact—for he ascertained it by inquiry—that there was not a single spring mattress in the whole house; so that there was nothing for it but to sleep, or attempt to sleep, upon a feather bed. And they had put him into the best bedroom, which was oak-panelled and of gigantic dimensions, and the bedstead itself was an appalling old four-poster. "Same as pore Mr. Morant died in," the old woman who had cooked the dinner informed him, by way of a recommendation.

Perhaps it was because he had spent such an extremely wretched night that the forlorn owner of Upton Chetwode was able to take a slightly more cheerful view of his demesne on the following morning. When one's spirits have reached the lowest attainable ebb, they must needs begin to flow again; besides, sunshine

makes a difference in everything and everybody. He did not in the least believe that he could reside permanently in such a place, but he thought he might be able to put up with it for a time, and that by laying out a little money upon it (though where the money was to come from he couldn't imagine) he might render it attractive enough to tempt a tenant of retiring tastes; and he felt a certain languid curiosity to make acquaintance with the details of English country life. It would at least be a new experience, if not a particularly exciting one. So he roamed over the house and the gardens, and had interviews with the few dependents whose services he had been compelled to retain, and he gave an order or two, and wrote some letters, and listened to a great many complaints, the nature of which he scarcely understood, and thus the day passed away more quickly than might have been anticipated. It was already evening when he set out to walk seawards, thinking that perhaps he would pursue his explorations as far as the village of Abbotsport, which, he had been given to understand, might be reached by a zigzag pathway cut in the face of the cliff.

Now it came to pass that while he was wandering along the confines of his domain in search of this path, he encountered a little old lady who was hurrying from another point of the compass towards the same destination, and who appeared to be much perturbed by the sight of him. She started, threw up her hands nervously and faltered out, "Oh, I'm afraid I'm trespassing."

Mark took off his hat. "You are very welcome, Madam," he replied, smiling.

In acknowledgment of this civility, the old lady made an antiquated bow, which was almost a curtsey. "I think," she said, "you must be Mr. Chetwode." And when he had admitted his identity she added, "We did not know that you were expected here so soon; otherwise, I should not have ventured to take this liberty,

The truth is that I have been calling at the Rectory, and was on my way to the village. This is a short cut which poor Mr. Morant kindly gave us permission to use."

"You will confer a favour on me if you will continue to use it," Mark declared. "This neighbourhood does not appear to be densely populated, and I presume that the permission was not given to an unlimited number of persons."

"Oh, dear, no!" returned the old lady, looking a little shocked at such an idea. "We ourselves very seldom took advantage of it. This afternoon I was rather in a hurry to get to Abbotsport, because I was anxious about my niece, who has gone out sailing. The wind, you see, has changed, and Mr. Lowndes says we may expect a gale; and sometimes it is impossible for boats to enter the harbour. Oh, dear, what a pity it is that young people will be so careless and thoughtless!"

"I don't think we are going to have a gale," said Mark, to comfort her, though in truth he was no judge of such matters. "But I can quite understand your anxiety. I myself am bound for the village; perhaps you will kindly permit me to accompany you, and will show me the way."

Miss Skipwith thought him a very pleasant-mannered young man, and assented graciously; but when she told him who she was, a change came over his face which she could not help noticing.

"Oh," she exclaimed, breathlessly, "perhaps I ought to have mentioned my name before. I am afraid—but really that is a great mistake—that you think Mr. Bligh has taken your property from you?"

"I may be mistaken, but I was certainly under the impression that the property had passed into Mr. Bligh's hands," said Mark, with a rather grim smile.

"Yes, but then you know it was paid for; and besides, it was not Wilfrid but his father who foreclosed—if that is the right word to use. It does seem so sad

and so unnecessary that there should be any bad feeling about it. Only the other day Cicely was saying that they would be delighted to let you buy the land back if you wished. Of course it isn't in her hands yet, and perhaps never will be, but I am sure that neither she nor her father would ever be guilty of an unneighbourly action."

"Is Cicely your niece?" asked Mark, who was amused and a little touched by the communicativeness of the elderly stranger.

"Yes, and the dearest and best girl in the world, though a little too fond of her own way. But that is only what might have been expected. Poor Wilfrid being so ill and suffering, and that dreadful son of his always absent, a great deal has devolved upon Cicely which other girls of her age would naturally have been spared. Just now I am in a good deal of trouble and perplexity about her. But I must really apologize for speaking to you about family affairs, which of course can't interest you."

"They would interest me very much indeed if you would tell me about them," answered Mark, smothering an inclination to laugh. "Please go on."

CHAPTER VIII.

CICELY IS INTERESTED

EVERYBODY who knew Miss Skipwith at all well agreed that she was a goose; and the general verdict was probably correct. Nevertheless, geese sometimes accomplish what wise persons might attempt in vain, and foolish old Miss Skipwith succeeded without any difficulty in breaking down the barrier of hostility which Mark Chetwode had conceived against

all who dwelt at the Priory. She did not, indeed, persuade him that he had no grievance, but she conveyed to him the impression that the present holder of estates which had belonged for centuries to the Chetwode family was as innocent a sinner as Louis XVI., and she made him feel that his quarrel was rather with circumstances than with individuals. She interested him, too, by what she told him about her nephew and niece. She led the way down the zigzag path, talking volubly the whole time, and pausing every now and then to glance over her shoulder, while she laid bare her simple hopes and fears.

Morton Bligh was a dreadful man—a man who had openly avowed his disbelief in revealed religion, and who had, besides, all his life long deliberately and persistently neglected the duties imposed upon him by birth. It would be a sad calamity for Abbotsport if ever Morton were to succeed his father.

"He cares nothing for the place. I doubt if he would ever live there. All he would do would be to exact every penny of rent that was due to him, and laugh if he were told that any of his tenants in the village were starving. With Cicely it would be very different; she loves the people and they love her. I don't say that she wouldn't make mistakes, because she is very young and headstrong, but at least her mistakes would be upon the right side."

"Possibly," said Mark, "Mr. Bligh may be aware of all this, and may dispose of his property accordingly."

Miss Skipwith sighed. "Of course he is aware of it," she answered, "but Wilfrid also is headstrong in his own way; nobody can dictate to him. He will do what he thinks right; and just now, I am afraid, he does not think it would be right to pass over his son. Morton, knowing how ill his father is, has come down here to show how well he can behave. Unfortunately, he has few opportunities of behaving badly in a place such as this. Still, he is very

rude and disagreeable: that, I suppose, he can't help being."

"I think," said Mark, smiling, "that the young lady's chances look promising."

"Ah, but there are complications. She has a cousin, an officer in a cavalry regiment, whom my brother-in-law has virtually adopted, and who is at present staying with us on leave. I daresay you can guess what *his* ambition is; and the worst of it is that Wilfrid is quite inclined to encourage him. Wilfrid is like most men; he can't believe that a woman can safely be entrusted with authority; and though he has never said so, I know perfectly well that nothing would please him more than to see Archie married to Cicely. Then, I think, he would probably make Archie his heir."

"And would that be such a very bad arrangement?"

"First-cousin marriages are always a bad arrangement," said Miss Skipwith, decisively; "but setting that aside, the arrangement would be bad because it would make Cicely unhappy. She has always been accustomed to rule; she wouldn't understand how to play second fiddle. I would rather that she had to leave Abbotsport altogether than that she should remain here in a subordinate position. Added to which, I don't see why that young man should have everything his own way. It isn't as if he were worthy to tie Cicely's shoe-strings."

"What does she herself think about it?" Mark inquired. "In England that is always an important question, I believe."

Miss Skipwith replied that that was, no doubt, a very important question, but that she was unable to answer it. All she knew was that Cicely seemed to like being with him, and that they were together a great deal more than she, for her part, thought desirable or even proper. "But people's ideas have changed so much since I was young," she added, sorrowfully. "This very afternoon they have gone out in a boat together, which

in former times would have been considered quite an impossible thing to do. To be sure they have a third person with them—a young Mr. Dare, who lives near this—but even so I can't think it right. And now if there is too much sea for them to get into the harbour they may be out half the night, for anything that we can do to prevent it."

It appeared, indeed, that Miss Skipwith was far more disquieted upon the score of propriety than upon that of physical risk; and this surprised her companion, because the nearer he drew to the sea the more he became aware that dirty weather was setting in. When they had passed down the steep, narrow street of the village and had reached the jetty, they found themselves in the midst of a group of experienced persons who were unanimously of opinion that the lugger, which could be seen running before the wind towards the harbour's mouth, was attempting a hazardous feat. It was now blowing something like half a gale, and the entrance of the harbour, which lay between the wooden jetty and the concrete breakwater, was marked by an ugly white line of foam where the waves curled and struck.

"Will they be able to get in?" asked Miss Skipwith anxiously of an ancient mariner in a sou'-wester.

"As much as they will, mum," answered the man. "You may say there is room, but you can't say no more. Oh, you ain't no call to be afeard, mum; they won't be drownded, though they might get a wetting. We'll get 'em ashore safe enough. But with the boat, you see, 'tis different. Once she gets upon that there bar she'll go to pieces for certain. 'Tis wrong to make light of other men's property in that way, and Coppard ought to have known a deal better than to do such things."

"Oh, if that is all, I am sure Mr. Bligh will be only too happy to pay for the boat," Miss Skipwith declared confidently.

Meanwhile the lugger was approaching her destina-

tion at a great rate of speed. Presently, the forms and features of all those who were on board were clearly discernible. Bobby Dare, with the tiller in his hand, was standing up, his keen eyes fixed upon the water ahead; Coppard, holding the sheet, was ready to lower the sail at the word of command; and it is a pity that neither Miss Skipwith nor Mark Chetwode possessed knowledge enough of seamanship to appreciate a manœuvre which elicited murmurs of admiration from their better instructed neighbours. However, when once a thing has been done every one sees how easy it was to do it, and as soon as the *Rover* had been brought alongside of the landing-steps, her handiness obtained more praise than Mr. Dare's skill. "Told'ee so, mum," grunted the fisherman in the sou'-wester (who had done nothing of the sort). "Bless yer 'eart, with a craft like that there a child could make this 'arbour at any tide and in any weather."

Miss Skipwith said, "Really? Well, I am very glad to hear it, I'm sure: it looks to me dreadfully dangerous."

She picked her way gingerly down the slippery steps, and began to administer one of the mild remonstrances to her niece which she ventured upon from time to time, much as a man across whose land a right of way has been established will close his gates once a year, in formal assertion of a privilege which has practically ceased to be his. "My dear Cicely," she exclaimed, "what a fright you have given us; you really should think a little more of what you are doing, and—and of other people's feelings. You, I daresay, would have thought it very good fun to be kept out at sea half through the night, but it would not have been at all good fun either for your father or for me to be left for hours in uncertainty as to whether you were alive or dead. I should have thought," added the old lady severely, "that Mr. Archibald might have remembered that, even if you forgot it."

When Miss Skipwith wished to be especially impressive it was her habit to speak of Archie as Mr. Archibald. She was perhaps aware that the designation irritated him.

"Well, we haven't remained out half through the night, you see, Aunt Susan," said Cicely, composedly; "so that there is no occasion to blame anybody. At all events, it would be most unjust to blame poor Archie, because nobody could have been more anxious than he was to get into harbour again. In fact, he simply insisted upon our risking our lives to do it."

Having thus, as it were, fired right and left with effect, Miss Bligh proceeded to disembark. Declining the proffered assistance of her two admirers, she laid her hand for an instant upon the shoulder of old Coppard, who was clinging to the jetty with his boat-hook, and sprang lightly out on the steps. But the steps were overgrown with seaweed, and so it came to pass that this self-reliant young lady's foot slipped, and that she would have fallen ignobly upon her nose, but for a pair of arms which were opportunely stretched out to save her. These she instinctively clutched until she had recovered her balance, when she became aware that they belonged to a young man whom she had never seen before, and who took off his hat, which he held for a moment in his hand, instead of at once replacing it after the English fashion. "I beg your pardon," he said.

"It is I who ought to beg yours," answered Cicely, laughing. "I wonder I didn't knock you down."

Cicely did not know the meaning of the word shyness. She was as much at her ease with a total stranger as with an intimate friend, and this was one of her idiosyncrasies which her aunt never quite knew whether to admire or to deprecate.

"Cicely, my dear," said the old lady, "let me introduce Mr. Chetwode, of whom you have often heard your father speak. Mr. Chetwode very kindly

gave me permission to walk through his grounds just now."

The young man's hat was once more raised, while Cicely bestowed a little bow and a scrutinizing gaze upon him.

She was much interested in the owner of Upton Chetwode, and had felt no slight anxiety to see what manner of man he was. Her first impression—and, like all women, she attached great importance to first impressions—was decidedly favourable. Handsome, he could hardly be called; perhaps too, on closer inspection, his face was somewhat older than his figure; but he had undoubtedly the appearance of a gentleman, and what was better still was, that he had not at all the appearance of an ordinary English gentleman. His colourless, expressionless face invited interrogation. All sorts of things might be hidden behind that seemingly impenetrable mask, which a young woman of inquiring bent might find amusement in calling forth. It is even possible that, without being aware of it, Miss Bligh may have been a trifle piqued by the absence of that tribute of frank admiration which she was accustomed to detect in the eyes of all men and to accept as her due.

"So you have come home at last," she said.

He shrugged his shoulders slightly. "I've come to my house," he replied. "At present I can't say that I feel very much at home there."

He spoke with just the faintest suspicion of a foreign accent, and Cicely noticed that his boots and gloves (had he any business to be wearing gloves at all?) were not of English make, although the rest of his costume was.

"Oh, but you must learn to feel at home here," she declared. "Aren't you proud of being an Englishman? You ought to be, you know."

"I will try to be as proud as I ought to be," he answered, gravely, "if you will kindly tell me the way to set about it. How should one begin?"

During the above interchange of remarks the whole party had been moving along the jetty, and it now occurred to Cicely that conversation might be carried on with less risk of interruption if one member of it were got rid of. Accordingly she turned round and extended her hand to the selected victim, saying, "Good-night, Bobby, and many thanks for the sail. Don't forget to give my love to your sisters."

"Oh, I'll walk part of the way home with you, if you don't mind," said poor Bobby, who was in no such hurry to be dismissed.

"But I do mind very much indeed; and Sir George will mind very much indeed if you are late for dinner. Do you know what time it is? You will only just save yourself, even if you run."

Now Sir George Dare, who never waited dinner for anybody, would assuredly not have dreamt of waiting for this young son of his; but Bobby was too completely under the sway of the imperious Cicely to dispute her commands. He took his leave sadly and submissively; and then she observed: "As for you, Mr. Chetwode, your way is the same as ours, for some little distance at all events."

"Indeed!" he said; "that is very fortunate for me." But he did not speak as if he felt her companionship to be any great privilege, and she glanced at him with an innocent surprise at his indifference which almost made him laugh.

"Now tell me," said he, to account for the smile which he could not altogether suppress, "how I am to convert myself into a good John Bull. Will it be easy, do you think?"

She frowned slightly. "Of course it will not be easy," she answered, "if you prefer being a foreigner; but really that seems to me a very odd sort of taste to have. Because you see you *are* an Englishman."

"More or less of one."

"Why, your family is English; everybody belongs to

his father's family. I know you have been brought up in Russia, but that's only an accident. You wouldn't have been a cannibal if you had been brought up in the Fiji Islands, I hope."

"I venture to hope not. Still there is no saying to what lengths one may not be carried by the influence of early associations. I have no reason to love England, whereas I have—or at least I suppose I ought to have—many reasons for loving Russia, where most of my friends and all my relations reside."

"Well," said Cicely, with fine liberality, "there is something in that, no doubt. At the same time, I shouldn't care to be neither the one thing nor the other, if I were you. Being English, and having property in England, I should wish to live on my property and do the best I could for it. And most likely that is just what you do wish, or you wouldn't have come home."

Mark's grave face was lighted up for an instant by a smile, and he glanced at the girl with more interest than he had hitherto displayed in her.

"Possibly you are right," he answered; "possibly that is what I want, but really I am not very sure about it. My property, as you know, has shrunk to such small dimensions that I should hardly find employment in looking after it, and my actual reason for coming here was the very simple one that an empty house is too expensive a luxury for me."

"You might quite well live here without being at home all the year round," said the girl, "and as for employment, a country gentleman need never be without that."

And straightway she began to point out to him how he might occupy his time agreeably to himself and profitably to his neighbours. She had not the most distant comprehension of the man to whom she was talking; her ideas of life and happiness and duty were necessarily circumscribed, but she had perfect confidence in their accuracy, and, such as they were, she expressed them

well. As for Mark, he was not particularly interested in her ideas, but he became a good deal interested in her, and it was with unaffected regret that he wished her good-bye on being informed that the point at which their paths diverged had been reached. He did not, however, offer to walk any farther than that point, nor did he respond, save by an inarticulate murmur, to Miss Bligh's expressed hope that they might meet again before long.

"I think he is rather queer, and rather nice," was the verdict which his unusual behaviour elicited from Cicely after he had withdrawn.

But Archie, who during all this time had been relegated to the background, and whose temper had not been improved by the enforced society of Miss Skipwith, said:

"I don't know so much about his being nice; he's queer enough for anything. One can forgive a Frenchman for trying to look like an Englishman, though of course he never succeeds; but there must be something very wrong indeed about an Englishman who tries to look like a Frenchman—especially when he does succeed."

"Oh, I daresay he will learn better things in time," answered Cicely. "In fact," she added demurely, "I feel sure he will, because I mean to take him in hand."

And the disgusted grunt with which this announcement was received was doubtless a source of amusement and gratification to her.

CHAPTER IX.

MORTON REPRESENTS THE FAMILY

It seemed that Miss Skipwith could not say enough in praise of Mr. Chetwode that evening. He was clever, he was distinguished, he had a singular charm of

manner; she had not for a long time met any one who had so impressed her with a sense of his superiority to the common run of men. She prattled on in this way both before and in the course of dinner; and her brother-in-law could not imagine why, until it dawned upon him that this artless schemer proposed to set the new-comer up as a counter-attraction to Archie. That discovery tickled him, and he led her on by a few careless, disparaging observations, which eventually had the effect of drawing his daughter into the arena.

"He may not be such a black swan as Aunt Susan makes him out; but at all events he is our nearest neighbour, and of course he must be called upon," said Cicely, decidedly.

"It is always comforting to have one's duty set before one in such plain language," remarked Mr. Bligh. "The only question is, who is to call upon him? *I* can't, because I have no legs; and I'm afraid conventionality would hardly allow of your doing it, my dear. Would the emergency be met by my sending a groom over with my card, do you think?"

Cicely shook her head.

"Much too formal," said she. "He wouldn't like it; he would take it as an intimation that you were willing to acknowledge him, but didn't care about cultivating him."

"*Do* I care about cultivating him?" inquired Mr. Bligh.

"You know you do," replied his daughter, tranquilly; "you know you are unhappy in your mind about that land of his, and you would like to have a chance of explaining to him that it isn't your fault that you are in possession of it."

"If I know myself," said Mr. Bligh—"but possibly I don't know myself—that is quite the last subject which I should wish to discuss with him. My title, I am assured, is a perfectly good title, legitimately acquired. If he thinks differently, he can go to law

about it; but I doubt whether he and I should become better friends by talking the matter over."

"Oh, you will talk the matter over," said Cicely, confidently. "He has taken up a wrong view of it, and you will have to set him right. Only there *is* a little difficulty about the first step, I admit. How would it do to write and ask him to dine?"

"I should not venture to take such a liberty," Mr. Bligh declared; and Miss Skipwith, who was very punctilious, was also of opinion that that suggestion was inadmissible.

"My dear," said she, "there must be a visit, and the visit must be returned, before any invitation can be sent."

"Well, then," said Cicely, "perhaps Archie might go, and take papa's card with him."

Archie looked recalcitrant; but before he could open his lips Morton had thrown himself into the breach.

"It seems to me," observed the latter languidly, "that I am marked out by fate as the proper person to undertake this act of social servitude. At what time do you suppose that your friend goes out for a walk, Cicely? At four o'clock?"

Cicely looked doubtfully at her brother. She could hardly dispute his right to represent the head of the family, but she was pretty sure that he did not entertain the friendly and neighbourly sentiments of the head of the family, and she thought it very likely that he would be rude to Mr. Chetwode.

"I know nothing about his habits," she said; "but I hope he may be out when you call."

"Thanks, very much; so do I. Perhaps you hope that for his sake, though, not for mine."

"Well, for your sake, and for his sake, and for everybody's sake. I don't think you would get on particularly well together, and I want him to like us."

For some reason or other this remark appeared to

amuse Morton, who began to laugh, and who laughed even more heartily when he noticed the frown on Archie's brow.

"Oh, you needn't be afraid," he returned; "he shall like us. Not me as an individual, perhaps—that would be a little too much to hope for—but he shall like us collectively, and when he has dined here I have no doubt that he will like you in particular. That, however, will naturally depend upon yourself. As for me, I will put on my best clothes and my best manners to-morrow afternoon, and I humbly trust that I may not disgrace the family."

Morton was as good as his word. After luncheon on the following day he set out on foot for Upton Chetwode, much though he disliked pedestrian exercise. There was, however, one thing that he disliked even more, which was getting upon the back of a horse; and Miss Skipwith had appropriated the carriage. For that matter, the walk was not a disagreeable one, being over grass or footpaths the whole way, and he had plenty of interesting reflections to keep him company.

Since his arrival at the Priory, Morton Bligh had been somewhat dejected in mind. His presence under his father's roof was, of course, due to a motive which everybody had divined, and which he himself had decided that it would be stupid and clumsy to conceal. His father was going to die; he was his father's natural and legitimate heir, and it was necessary for him to show that, whatever he might be, or have been, he could live an outwardly decent and respectable life. It was necessary, he thought, for him to do this, because he believed his father to be one of those scrupulous persons who always set duty above inclination, and because he could form a tolerably shrewd guess what Mr. Bligh's inclinations were. But his father's demeanour had puzzled him. Mr. Bligh had been perfectly good-humoured, tolerant, and amiable, had not repulsed him, nor made the faintest allusion to incidents which could

not have been alluded to without embarrassment; yet not a word had been spoken as to the management of the property, or as to any of the topics to which a dying man might be expected to refer in conversation with his successor. It was plain—or so, at all events, Morton feared—that the dying man's will had not yet been signed. Now there was very little probability that Cicely would be placed in her brother's shoes. One does not replace a son by a daughter, and Morton himself had a contempt for women which he suspected his father of sharing to a considerable extent. But doubtless a nephew who has married your only daughter and who bears your own name may, at a pinch, be made to do duty for a son who has been weighed in the balance and found wanting. This was what troubled Morton. He saw, and could not help seeing—even Miss Skipwith saw it—that Archie was receiving every encouragement to propose to Cicely; he saw, what perhaps Miss Skipwith was too blinded by prejudice to see, that the young soldier had fallen desperately in love with his cousin; and, for his own part, he was only too well aware that nobody would pity him if he were to receive a substantial money legacy instead of his birthright.

His record, in truth, was shockingly bad. It was not only that he had led a life of idle dissipation, and that his debts had had to be paid for him more than once; it was not only that he had gone his own way, taking no notice of his father and sister, and never so much as writing a letter to them from year's end to year's end; these are offences which may be pardoned. But (being by no means devoid of brains, and having a certain mischievous bent of mind) he had at one time amused himself by reading up the indictments which have been brought by learned men against accepted systems of theology, and, though he was in reality no scholar, he had written articles in advanced reviews which had gained for him a certain notoriety. That had been a great mistake, and he was very sorry now that he had

committed it, because, as a matter of fact, he did not care two straws what mankind at large might be pleased to believe in and worship. However, there it was in black and white, and there was no getting out of it. Worse things, moreover, than that might be said of him. London society in these days has not the name of being over-squeamish; yet there were many men and many women in London who would not be seen speaking to Morton Bligh.

And so the long and the short of it was, that if by any means Cicely could be prevented from marrying Archie, that end must be accomplished. Therefore Morton was on his way to call upon Mark Chetwode, in whom he had observed with satisfaction that his sister's interest had been powerfully aroused. Archie, it might be assumed, would not be made Mr. Bligh's heir if he did not marry Cicely; Mark Chetwode would surely not be raised to that enviable position if he did. And Chetwode was poor, and Cicely was not only pretty but would have a fortune of thirty or forty thousand pounds at least.

The solitary denizen of Upton Chetwode was smoking a cigarette in his comfortless dining-room when his visitor was announced. After a somewhat formal greeting, he expressed a hope that the latter did not mind the smell of tobacco, to which Morton replied that he would be grateful if he too might be allowed to smoke.

A man who will smoke with you is by that very fact to some extent a companionable creature, and Morton's manners were pleasant enough when he took the trouble to make them so. Mark rather liked the man, though (as he was accustomed to scrutinize men and motives) it did not take him very long to discover that there was some unavowed reason for this display of neighbourly courtesy. Morton, it should be mentioned, had deplorable nerves. Without being precisely a glutton or a sot, he had nevertheless for many years habitually eaten and

drunk more than was good for him, besides having taken very little exercise; and the consequence was that when he attempted to be artful he speedily made his aims evident to a practised observer. Mark, cold, temperate, and constitutionally suspicious, was a great deal more than a match for him. They discussed (for what else could they begin by discussing?) local topics and local means of passing the time; Morton avowed his abhorrence of the country, and was pleased to learn that his host was no great lover of field sports.

"You'll be bored to death down here," he said; "that's a matter of course. But, perhaps, if you're inclinedto be charitable, you'll sometimes come over to the Priory and relieve our chronic boredom. I haven't any inducement to offer you beyond a sincere welcome and the governor's Madeira, which I can conscientiously praise. By the way, he sent you all sorts of messages and apologies. He would have come to pay his respects to you in person, but he never gets beyond the garden now, as I daresay you have heard from my old aunt. You have won Aunt Susan's heart, I must tell you; and as for Cicely—well, I suppose it wouldn't be proper to say that she has lost her heart to you," laughed Morton; "but anyhow she is very anxious to see more of you. Won't you come and dine quietly some evening?"

Mark said what was polite and necessary in reply. He began in a casual, indifferent way to put indirect questions; also he rang the bell, and ordered brandy-and-soda, of which his guest was pleased to partake freely; and so, in about twenty minutes, he found out all he wanted to know. That Morton was not upon the best of terms with his father, that he was in mortal dread of being ousted by his cousin Archie, and that he was only sojourning at the Priory now in the hope of bringing personal influence to bear against the interloper—all this was elicited, without effort on the one side or con-

sciousness of self-betrayal on the other, and all doubt as to the nature of Morton's scheme was removed when that ingenuous plotter remarked:

"I assure you that I don't half like the idea of having to spend the rest of my life in this neighbourhood; but it will have to come to that, I expect. And I shall be all alone, too; for it isn't over and above likely that my sister will care to stay and keep house for me. She will have a fortune of her own—something like fifty thousand pounds, probably." (For Morton thought there could be no harm in adding a trifle of ten thousand pounds or so to his mental estimate.)

"Your cousin is a very good-looking young man," said Mark, with his faint smile, and his slight foreign accent. "I should like to be your cousin."

"I don't call him good-looking; and he's as stupid as an owl," returned Morton. "Why should you want to change places with him?"

"Oh, only a fancy, which perhaps it is impertinent in me to mention. Seeing them together, it struck me that he was upon terms of something more than friendship with your sister, that was all. So much beauty, and fifty thousand pounds besides—you must admit that he is enviable."

"I think," said Morton, who had swallowed two rather strong glasses of brandy-and-soda, "that if I were ten years younger, and if I admired a girl with Cicely's advantages, I should be no more afraip of such a fellow as Archie than I should be afraid of the curate or the doctor."

Having delivered himself of this statement with much impressiveness, he rose to depart. Mark's speech had been unquestionably impertinent—even very impertinent; but Morton did not resent it. On the contrary, he was quite pleased to have been furnished with an opportunity of asserting so unequivocally that Archie was no formidable antagonist. Thus it is that the

reasoning powers of the brain become enfeebled when the other organs of the body are not kept in a proper state of subjection,

"You'll come to dinner, then, some day soon, won't you?" he said, with a slight thickness of utterance, as he held out his limp little hand. "I'll tell Cicely to send you a formal invitation, though you won't be asked to a formal party. I believe we do give formal dinner-parties from time to time, but we won't be so brutal as to include you among our victims."

When he had gone, Mark laughed a little and walked once or twice up and down the room; and then, taking up his pen, resumed the letter which had been interrupted by the entrance of the visitor.

"It seems to me," he wrote, "that I am in a fair way towards carrying out your benevolent programme. The brother of the young lady whom you were so kind as to select for my future partner through life has just been calling here, and has hinted broadly—possibly a little too broadly—that he would be charmed to welcome me as his brother-in-law. Naturally he has his reasons: he is not quite so disinterested as you are. He thinks that his father wishes to bring about a marriage between Miss Cicely (that, I believe, is her name) and a young cousin of whom old Mr. Wingfield spoke to me, and whom I forget whether I mentioned to you or not. In the case of that project succeeding, the young cousin, it seems, would be made heir to the entire property; but it is not considered likely that any other son-in-law than the cousin would be preferred before the heir-apparent. Consequently I am implored to come forward, and a bribe of fifty thousand pounds is offered to me by way of inducement. Would you believe that, poor as I am, I hesitate to take advantage of this generous suggestion? I am sure you would not believe it if you saw Miss Bligh, who happens to be quite pretty and agreeable, and that it would be difficult to convince you how little her charms have to say to the matter. Do

you think fifty thousand pounds a very large sum of money? In all truth and candour, I think liberty is worth more than that; but I am aware that upon such points your ideas differ from mine."

Having wound up his letter, and addressed it to Madame Souravieff, he put on his hat and walked down to the iron railing which divided the garden from the park. Upon this he dropped his arms, and so stood for a long time, revolving many considerations in his mind. It is quite true that a bribe of fifty thousand pounds hardly tempted him, welcome though such a supply of hard cash would have been to a man in his straitened circumstances; it was also true that Cicely's personal attractions had left him cold. If you are not in love with a woman, what can it signify whether she is pretty or ugly? But there was one thing he cared about a good deal, and always rather wondered at himself for caring about, which was the recovering of the lands of which he considered that he had been wrongfully dispossessed. No one can relinquish without something of a pang and a wrench the religious faith in which he has been brought up; and in much the same way Mark Chetwode found it impossible to free himself from the impressions which had been dinned into his ears from his earliest childhood. Legally speaking, he might have no sort of case against these prosperous, wealthy, condescending Bligh, but he could not help longing to be avenged upon them, to get the better of them; and if this desire could not be satisfied in one way, perhaps it might be in another. To get the better of the debilitated creature who had just left him would surely be a task of no great difficulty; and as to the cousin, he appeared to be a very commonplace person. There remained Mr. Bligh, with whom, of course, it would be needful to ingratiate oneself; but, as far as could be gathered from report, Mr. Bligh was only too eager to find some heir who might decently be substituted for

his son. Was the stake worth playing for? Mark eventually decided that it was; and, oddly enough, what helped him towards this decision was his conviction that if ever success should seem to be within his reach, he would have no more vehement opponent to contend against than Madame Souravieff.

CHAPTER X.

CICELY HAS POOR SPORT

In these days, hunting ladies are so numerous that it is scarcely more necessary to apologize for them than George III. thought it necessary to write an apology for the Bible. Nevertheless, there still remain certain old-fashioned people who think that a woman is out of her place in the hunting-field, and of these Miss Skipwith was one. She had never felt able to approve of her niece following the hounds, and although she had never been able to prevent her niece from doing that, or anything else which the self-willed young woman in question intended to do, she considered herself bound to uphold her testimony from time to time—that is, as often as the hounds met within manageable distance of the Priory. And it is needless to add that the escort of Archie Bligh did not present itself to her in the light of a mitigating circumstance. But what could she do when the girl's own father backed her up, and refused to see the slightest impropriety in her enjoying what he called a "good healthy gallop" in the company of her cousin? Mr. Bligh had himself been an ardent sportsman until his health had broken down; he had perhaps a somewhat exaggerated admiration for the virtues which sport, combined with a spice of danger, brings into prominence; and possibly he did not sufficiently recognize

that, although bravery may be a very fine thing, the kind of bravery which life demands of women is of a very different class from that which it demands of men.

And so, when the hounds met at Upton Mill, it was altogether useless for Miss Skipwith to try and defraud Cicely and Archie of a happy day.

"My dear Susan," said Mr. Bligh, in response to certain oft-repeated remonstrances of hers, "they mean to be there, and it is my belief that neither you nor I can hold them back by anything short of hamstringing every horse in the stables; to which I am not prepared to consent. You need not be so alarmed; they won't come to any harm. One age is only you, for a few years, and during these few years wise young people make the most of their time."

"You speak as if we were only here to amuse ourselves, Wilfrid," said Miss Skipwith, in a dissatisfied tone of voice.

"Do I? I have never been able to discover exactly what we are here for; and, with all due deference, I doubt whether you can tell me. But one thing I know: we are born with certain cravings which are bound to be satisfied in this way or in that; and for my part I have always been strongly on the side of physical exertion and exhaustion. You think perhaps that a young man and a young woman who go out hunting together are like a young man and a young woman in a ball-room; but then you have never hunted. I am going to put Archie up on the Flying Dutchman, and I know what that means, though you don't. When once hounds are running he will forget all about Cicely, and, what is better still, Cicely, who is going to ride Hypatia, will forget all about him. Ah, if I could only have one more day with them—just one more before I die!"

Perceiving that it was a waste of time to reason with a man who could talk in that way, Miss Skipwith sighed and gave in, and kept her own opinion, as usual;

and one fine morning Archie and Cicely trotted off to the meet, without let or hindrance. Moreton declined o accompany them, owning with his customary frankness that he had no longer nerve to hunt.

"I have only one neck," he said, "and nothing would annoy me more than to break it. However, I wouldn't for the world deter you from breaking yours." And this was as true and honest an assertion as any assertion could be.

Hunting had already ceased in many parts of England, but that was a late country.

"We go on up to the last permissible moment," Cicely informed her companion, "and begin again at the first. The worst of it is that I can't hunt at all regularly now, because it isn't thought right for me to go out quite alone."

"Well, I'll be here as much and as often as I can," Archie replied.

"Thank you; that is very kind of you. But you must please to remember that when you are here your duty will be simply to escort me to the meet. From the moment we have found you will cease to have any responsibility, and you will only think of your own interests. I am very well able to take care of myself, and if I catch you attempting to take care of me I will never forgive you. Mind that."

Archie laughed and said: "All right, then; I quite understand."

He was very well pleased with his mount—a powerful, free-going grey; but as he had never ridden the horse before, he could not be aware, as his uncle was that he was bestriding one of the best hunters that ever was bred, and he fully intended to keep an eye upon his cousin, even though this should prove to his own detriment. Cicely's chestnut mare was an animal of quite another class—nervous, high-courageed, and requiring a light hand and a good deal of riding; but Cicely was an accomplished horsewoman.

"The mare will be all right after the first few minutes," she said, in reply to some expression of uneasiness on Archie's part. "Unless something upsets her at starting she will be as good as gold. You needn't trouble your head about her—or about me either."

But of course he could not help troubling his head about her, and although he admired her seat and her hands, he was vexed and surprised that his uncle should have given her such a mount. As a matter of fact, Mr. Bligh, who did not himself know the meaning of the word fear, had perfect confidence in Cicely's skill, and would have trusted her with any horse in his stables.

At the meet, which was in a central locality, a great concourse of people was assembled. There was young Lord Shoreham, the M.F.H., whose language was apt to be more emphatic than choice, and of whom everybody stood in awe; there was Sir George Dare, a ruddy-cheeked, white-whiskered gentleman, with a good-humoured smile, and a high, squeaky voice; there, too, was Bobby, looking somewhat ill at ease upon the fiddle-headed, raw-boned steed which had been assigned to him. Bobby was not at all fond of hunting, and every time he went out he did so with the full assurance that he carried his life in his hands. That risk, however, he was always willing, like a true-born British sailor, to accept, and he was now about to imperil his neck with more or less of cheerfulness upon the off-chance of earning Cicely's approval. He rode up to her side as soon as she appeared upon the scene, although, while according him a smiling greeting, she warned him not to approach too closely.

"Keep clear of the mare's heels," she said, as, notwithstanding her signal, he drew nearer: "otherwise you may get a broken leg before you know where you are."

But Bobby, who thought he was in much more danger of getting a broken heart, chose to disregard this caution. His father had engaged Archie in conversation, so that

presently he had the privilege of riding with Miss Bligh to the covert-side, and hearing from her own lips that she did not want to have anything more to do with her cousin.

"I know that he is possessed with the idea that he is in charge of me," she said; "and I am sure he will keep looking over his shoulder the whole time—which will exasperate me beyond all bearing. Considering that I know every yard of the country, and that he hasn't ridden over it since he was a boy of sixteen, I really think he would do more wisely to mind his own business, and leave me to mind mine."

Bobby cordially concurred. At the same time he did not quite like the look of Cicely's plunging, hot mare, and he said with a sigh: "I wish I were capable of taking charge of you; but it is as much as I can accomplish to make this brute of mine answer, even if we don't part company altogether, as I fear we shall before long." He added in a melancholy tone, "I suppose you utterly despise a man who can't ride, don't you?"

Now it was true that Cicely thought every man ought to be able to manage a horse. Sailors, no doubt, are to some extent privileged persons, yet she could not help finding any human being who held on by his reins a trifle ridiculous, and poor Bobby would perhaps have been better advised if he had remained at home that morning. Therefore she left his question unanswered, and after a time he put another one to her: "Are cavalry men always flyers across a country?" he inquired, diffidently.

"Really, I can't tell you," she answered, laughing; "but I don't know why they should be. If Archie sees more of the run than you or I do, he won't have much to brag about. The Dutchman will ask nothing more of him than to stick to his saddle."

Bobby was by no means confident of his own capacity to comply even with that modest requirement; but he

was pleased to hear himself bracketed with Cicely, and he resolved to keep alongside of her if he could. That, however, was a programme which he probably could not, under any circumstances, have carried out, and, as it chanced, he lost sight of her almost immediately after deciding upon it. For scarcely had the covert been drawn when a fox was found and got away, and for ten minutes after that event all control over his own movements was taken out of the young sailor's hands. His career, though brief, was glorious. He was borne at a high rate of speed down a steep hillside; he was lifted, to his utter amazement, over three stiff fences, after each of which experiences he found himself with his arms round his horse's neck; and when at length he was deposited quite easily and comfortably in a bed of rushes, he did not in the least realize why he was there, until he became aware of a broad stream in front of him, and came to the just conclusion that his horse had declined to attempt impossibilities.

Cicely, meanwhile, had got off badly. Both she and her mare were taken by surprise, and for several hundred yards they were much hampered by the too numerous field. At the first fence the mare jumped short and very nearly landed on her nose. This perhaps roused her not very amiable temper: for no sooner had she recovered herself than she threw up her head and broke clean away. There was nothing to be done but to sit tight and keep cool. Cicely had sense enough and experience enough to know that: also she had enough of both to be aware that she was in imminent danger of a bad fall. The mare, for the time being, had completely lost her senses, and would certainly rush blindly at any obstacle that might lie in her path. She might get over such obstacles or she might not: anyhow it was hopeless to attempt to steady her. And as it came to pass that Miss Bligh was only prevented by good luck from jumping upon the hounds, and that Lord Shoreham apostrophized her under his breath in

terms quite unfit for reproduction. Her heart failed her a little when she saw a great ragged bullfinch before her, which it was scarcely within the bounds of possibility that she could clear without slackening speed, and she made up her mind that the end was at hand. However, she threw up her arm to protect her face, and was hurled through somehow or other, though not without a crash and a jerk which very nearly sent her out of her saddle. Immediately after this the mare began to falter, and was easily brought to a standstill in the middle of a ploughed field.

"I thought as much," murmured Cicely, as she slipped her foot out of the stirrup and sprang down to the ground; and a brief examination of her mount showed her that her suspicions had been only too well founded. The mare, with starting eyeballs and heaving flanks, was quiet enough now, while from a long jagged wound in her shoulder the blood was dripping slowly. It was very evident that not only could there be no more hunting for Miss Bligh that day, but that one of the best animals in her father's possession had been marked for life. This, it will be allowed, was no fault of Cicely's; but she felt very guilty all the same, and the worst of it was that she could not judge what the extent of the mischief might be. She had no means of binding up the mare's wound, nor could she tell by a hasty inspection whether it was deep or merely superficial. All she knew was that it behoved her to lead the sufferer home without further loss of time; and this she immediately prepared to do, hooking up her riding habit and passing her arm through the bridle. One comfort was that she was in no danger of being bothered by offers of unskilled assistance; for Bobby Dare had disappeared, and on a distant hillside against the sky she could see Archie and his gallant grey sailing along in blissful unconsciousness of everything save the delightful fact that they had shown a clean pair of heels to their competitors. So, perceiving that there was a

gate at the corner of the field, she made for it, and was soon on the high road which connects Abbotsport with the county town.

Along this road it so chanced that a landed proprietor of the vicinity was at that moment wending his lonely way. He was deeply immersed in thought, and his eyes were cast down, so that he did not at once become aware that a lady leading a lame horse had debouched upon the grassy wayside ahead of him. As soon, however, as he did become aware of her he quickened his pace, caught her up and accosted her.

"How do you do, Miss Bligh?" said he, taking off his hat. "Why are you on foot? Have you had an accident?"

Cicely recognized Mr. Chetwode, without much pleasure at an encounter which she felt to be inopportune. She wanted to get home and she didn't want to talk.

"I'm afraid I have staked my mare," she answered. "Do you know anything about horses? Perhaps you can tell me whether she is badly hurt or not."

It did not seem very likely that this alien had any knowledge of such subjects, and she only put the question to him because she supposed that, being a man, he might feel slighted if she did not pay him the compliment of consulting him; but in truth, Mark, who had always been a lover of horses, possessed some little veterinary skill, and after a brief examination he was able to assure her that the damage done was comparatively trifling.

"I do not promise you that no trace of the mishap shall remain," said he. "The cut will have to be sewn up, and unluckily it is not a clean cut; but I think I may safely say that the real value of the animal will not be affected, although, perhaps, the selling value may be."

Cicely was relieved and was also decidedly impressed. She came of a sporting family, and although she was

personally large-minded enough to admit that a man may be an admirable member of the community and yet not know a horse from a cow, she could not help thinking him a good deal more admirable if he did. She at once dropped into easy conversation with her companion, relating the particulars of her misadventure, to which he listened with deferential interest while he paced slowly by her side.

"You ought to hunt," she remarked, after a time. "Why don't you?"

"For the best reason in the world," he answered. "I have no horses, and no money to buy any."

Cicely was silent for a moment or two. She had an uncomfortable feeling that although Mr. Chetwode's impecuniosity was no fault of hers, he might consider her father in some measure responsible for it.

"But really," she resumed at length, "I don't see how you can go on living here unless you hunt. There is nothing else to be done during the winter, you see. Except, of course, the shooting, which would help you through a few months."

"Only I can't afford either keepers or pheasants," observed Mark, with a smile. "Perhaps, however, I shall not go on living here."

"You mean that you will let your house again?"

"If I can find any one sufficiently insane to take it. If I can't——" He shrugged his shoulders and drew down the corners of his mouth expressively.

Thereupon Cicely read him a serious lecture. She declared emphatically that it is the plain duty of landowners, whether rich or poor, to reside upon their land. "A tenant," she said, "can never take the place of the real owner of the soil, nor fulfil half his functions; and this assertion she supported by instances and examples.

"After all, what will you do if you leave Upton Chetwode again, I wonder?" she inquired in conclusion.

"Ah!" he returned, lifting his eyebrows, "I wonder!"

He thought her very pretty, and her confident way of

offering her opinion and advice amused him; but she did not touch his heart. Madame Souravieff would perhaps have said that he had no heart to be touched. And it may be that Cicely, who, though no flirt, yet was accustomed to homage of a kind which this stranger showed no inclination to pay her, was a little puzzled and piqued by a failure of which she could not but be conscious: for she certainly took great pains to be pleasant to him, and even went so far as to hint that she could enter into his feelings about those ancestral possessions of his which had passed into other hands.

"Of course it must be horrid for you," she said, when he had informed her that the subject was rather a sore one with him; "but then if I were you, I think I should set before myself as an object the getting of that land back again. It would be something to live for."

He laughed.

"But in order to attain that object two things are indispensable—first, that the present proprietor should be willing to sell; and, secondly, that I should have money enough to tempt him. How would you get over those difficulties, Miss Bligh?"

"I don't believe the first is a difficulty at all," she answered. "As for the second, money may be acquired after fifty fashions. Where there's a will there's a way."

She dismissed him at her father's gates, frankly expressing a hope that she might see him again soon, and if Mark placed a mistaken interpretation upon her words and demeanour, it would be hardly fair to blame him. He was not a coxcomb, but he had some excuse for thinking that he understood women, and it did appear to him that he had been invited in pretty plain language to offer himself as a candidate for the hand of the heiress. But before complying with that invitation it would perhaps be prudent to ascertain whether she really was to be an heiress or not.

CHAPTER XI.

COPPARD IN TROUBLE

"Oh, we're quite convinced that you are guilty. We don't entertain any doubt at all as to that. But we have come to the conclusion that the evidence is insufficient, and therefore you will be discharged this time; and a very lucky fellow you are to get off, I can tell you—a precious lucky fellow! Now you take my advice and be very careful what you are about in future; because if you are brought up before us again you may not find us so disposed to be lenient."

This remarkable illustration of that fine old axiom of English law which declares every man innocent until he has been proved guilty was provided for the delectation of a limited audience by Sir George Dare, who was sitting upon the bench of justice, flanked by several anxious colleagues. Sir George's colleagues were always a little anxious about him; because in these evil days one never can be sure that there is not some mischievous busybody at hand taking notes, and it is of course most undesirable that paragraphs should get into the newspapers which may tend to lessen the respect of the public for the unpaid magistracy. But Sir George cared not two straws for his colleagues or the newspapers or the public, and nothing whatever was to be gained by digging your elbows into his ribs.

"What I think I shall say," he was wont to reply when counsels of prudence were offered to him, and if he thought it would do any culprit good to tell him that he was a rascal, although his rascality could not be proved by strict rule of evidence, he never shrank from doing his duty to that culprit. The culprits had no objection. They knew that Sir George was a great deal more fond of scolding than of passing severe sentences, and

they knew and cared as little about his law as he did himself.

The prisoner who had been addressed in the terms above mentioned said: "Thank 'ee, sir," and touched his grey forelock, preparatory to resuming his position as an honest householder without a stain upon his character. David Coppard thought it no shame to be a poacher, and if he was a notorious thief, he was seldom so designated in his hearing, because of the length and strength of his arms. Behind his back he was, of course, liable, like the rest of us, to have unpleasant things said of him by malicious and cowardly persons, but no sensible man deigns to take notice of what may be said behind his back. Coppard was in the habit of borrowing (not stealing, which is a very different thing) the lines and nets and lobster-pots of his neighbours. This was an understood thing, and the freedom was readily pardoned by his neighbours in consideration of the borrower's admirable seamanship, which was almost always at their service. As for rabbits, everybody knows what mischief those animals do, and how much more they would do, if their numbers were not kept down by the exertions of nocturnal sportsmen. But unfortunately there are certain miserable landlubbers whose minds are so warped by prejudice and selfishness that they begin to make a fuss if a man cannot settle his little account for tea and sugar at the end of a year, and who will avail themselves of any paltry pretext that may come handy to get such a man into trouble. Thus it was that Mr. Coppard had been subjected to the indignity of arrest upon a charge of petty larceny, and had incurred no small inconvenience in obtaining the acquittal which was his due.

It will, perhaps, hardly be believed that any one could be so mean as to give a fellow-citizen and constant customer into custody because a trumpery hammer belonging to him had been discovered in the possession of that fellow-citizen, yet this is what Simpkins, the

Abbotsport grocer, had done; and as Coppard trudged homewards nothing seemed to him more obvious and just and essential than that he should take the first opportunity of paying Simpkins out. As for the hammer, he had no doubt made use of it. When a derelict hammer finds its way by some unexplained means to one's premises, and when one happens, oddly enough, to be in want of such an article at that very time, one naturally makes use of it. Surely the fact of its having a big S branded upon the handle does not saddle a busy man with the responsibility of running round to everybody in Abbotsport whose name begins with an S and inquiring if they have mislaid anything. The magistrates, at all events, had very properly decided that no such responsibility rested upon Mr. Coppard, and he was free from any feeling of rancour against them. Still the fact remained that he had been very badly treated. So that when, on reaching the high road, he chanced to encounter Mr. Robert Dare and young Mr. Bligh, he could not rest satisfied with touching his hat to these gentlemen, but must needs impart to them the story of his wrongs.

"A hunjust charge; that's where 'tis, you see, sir," said he, fixing his eye on Bobby, who looked the more sympathetic of the two. "I can't get no remedy, so they tell me; but it do come hard on a workin' man to be deprived of two days' earnings, not to mention the missus's bad temper, which I shall be sure to suffer from it soon as ever I get 'ome. I couldn't estimate this job at a farthing less than ten shillings out o' my pocket, sir.'

Bobby's finger and thumb were at once inserted into his own. Bobby had a sneaking affection for old Coppard, though he was quite as well aware as his father that Coppard's character would not bear too close investigation.

But Archie, who had no foolish predilections of the kind, and who was in a bad humour into the bargain, said:

"It strikes me that you have not much to complain about, my friend. People who are found in possession of stolen goods don't as a general rule get off scot-free, and I rather suspect that if I had been upon the bench you wouldn't have been at liberty at this moment."

Coppard bent his shaggy brows and from beneath them shot an angry glance at the speaker.

"Then, sir," said he, "I'm 'umbly thankful as you're not upon the bench now, nor likely to be. Nor likely to be," he added with emphasis, while he pocketed Bobby's half-sovereign, saying: "Thank 'ee kindly, Cap'en, and 'twill be a dooty and a pleasure to me to drink your good 'ealth. Likewise that of Sir George and all true gentlemen; which there ain't a many of 'em left, sir."

"Well, don't drink our healths more than once or twice, you know, Coppard," returned Bobby, laughing.

"He'll drink as long as he has any money to spend on drink, you may be sure," said Archie, when the two young men had resumed their walk. "What an ass you are to tip such an old ruffian! You're only stimulating the liquor traffic, and doing him a great deal more harm than good."

This being in all probability true, Bobby remained meekly silent. From the days when they had been boys together he had always been accustomed to be called an ass by Archie, and had always felt that the accusation was justified by facts. He had no sort of admiration for himself, while he had a great admiration for his companion, mingled with such envy as an honest man may entertain of one who has ever surpassed him in those attributes which are apt to excite general admiration. Wandering towards Abbotsport that morning, with a secret hope of meeting Cicely, he had met her cousin instead, and having been informed by the latter that Miss Bligh was spending the day at the Rectory, had generously invited him to come home to luncheon. This invitation Archie had accepted after a moment's hesitation. He did not want to be bored by

90752

the numerous Miss Dares, but he was still less desirous of returning to the Priory and struggling to keep upon terms of civility with Morton while deprived of Cicely's restraining influence; and Cicely had given him to understand that she had parish matters to talk over with Mrs. Lowndes which would keep her occupied until at least the middle of the afternoon.

"I hear you were in at the death the other day," remarked Bobby, after a pause.

"Oh yes," answered the other, in a somewhat dissatisfied voice; "I couldn't have helped it unless I had tried. I certainly should have tried if I had known my cousin had come to grief; but I lost sight of her and took it for granted that her mare had refused the brook. What became of you?"

"Well, I can hardly tell you," replied Bobby. "After a bit I found myself standing on my head, and then I had a great piece of work to catch my brute of a horse. When I did catch him, I climbed up on his back and went home. It didn't occur to me that Miss Bligh might be in need of assistance."

"She wasn't in need of any assistance that you could have given her," responded Archie, rather unkindly. "A man who had known what he was about might have changed the saddles and saved her a long walk, that's all. As it happened, she fell in with that fellow Chetwode, who, she says, set her mind at ease. Though how he could have set her mind at ease without telling a pretty big cram I don't know, considering that the mare is marked for life."

Instowe, the residence of Sir George Dare, was a large rambling white house of no architectural pretensions. That it was large was a fortunate circumstance, seeing that it corresponded in that respect with Sir George's family. Sir George was the father of five sons and six daughters. The former were all earning their living, or almost earning it, in various professions, and only one of them, Bobby, was now at home: but the

latter remained under the paternal roof, and Lady Dare feared that there was every possibility of their remaining there permanently, because it was useless to shut one's eyes to the fact that they were not pretty. Plain they could not fairly be called; but in a county cruelly denuded of bachelors there is little chance for girls who have only just escaped being plain; and as for seasons in London, Sir George declared that once in three years was the very utmost that his resources could be made to meet. Consequently Lady Dare was a little peevish at times.

She received the unexpected guests with a good deal of friendliness; and Archie, who had known the stout, grey-haired, harassed-looking woman all his life, and had always been rather of a favourite of hers, was put into somewhat better humour by her cordiality. Archie, after all, was unmarried, and certain to be pretty well provided for by his rich uncle. It was said, to be sure, that he was smitten with his cousin; but that did not at all prove that his cousin was smitten with him, and the most unlikely events are for ever occurring. Lady Dare would have thought it very wrong and very foolish to show any lack of civility to the young soldier; nor were the six Misses Dare (whose ages ranged from seventeen to eight-and-twenty) remiss in welcoming this addition to the family luncheon-party. Good-humoured, rosy-faced Sir George, who bustled in just as the big bell on the top of the house was set going, was quite as hearty and much more disinterested. Sir George reposed his trust in Providence, and imagined that if his daughters were destined to marry, the right man would turn up at the right time. He entertained no sort of hope of Archie Bligh, who, for his part, he sincerely trusted might marry Cicely and oust that worse than useless creature, Morton.

"Well," he said, as soon as he had taken his place at the head of the table and had commenced operations upon the joint before him, "we let off your friend Coppard

this morning, Bobby. Not that he deserved it. There isn't a more poaching, thieving vagabond in these parts, and so I've told him scores of times. Much he cares what one tells him! Still the rascal has a wife and family."

"He has a great respect for you, Sir George," remarked Archie. "We met him on our way here, and Bobby gave him half a sovereign, which he said he would expend in drinking your health."

"The devil he did!" ejaculated Sir George. "Confound the fellow! Why I gave him half-a-crown myself to compensate him for his loss of time; and quite enough too. I tell you what it is, Bobby; if you're going to behave in this way, the sooner you get afloat again the better. Half-a-sovereign for stealing a hammer! At that rate the next time he helps himself to my pheasants he'll expect a five-pound note, I suppose."

"And very likely get it," remarked the eldest Miss Dare, who was credited by her family with a great deal of practical common sense. "Bobby," she continued, "may be excused; he knows no better. But really, papa, I don't understand why you gave Coppard that half-crown."

"My dear, I have told you," replied Sir George. "The man had lost a day's work; and after all it was a trumpery charge. Very shabby of Simpkins, in my opinion, and I shall certainly let him know what I think of him."

"I wish you would mention to him at the same time that he systematically sends us short measure of everything," said Lady Dare. "One gets one's groceries from the local man because it is one's duty, and one submits to their being very bad and very dear; but it is a little too much that he should swindle us into the bargain."

The conversation after this turned chiefly upon the misdeeds of Simpkins and others, and was utterly uninteresting to Archie, who ate his mutton in silence

and wished himself away. Nor was he much better pleased when the topic of Lady Dare's annual ball, which was appointed to take place shortly, was introduced. He was obliged to say that he would be delighted to attend that festivity, but he inwardly resolved that his presence should be conditional upon that of Cicely, which he knew from her own lips to be as yet an uncertain factor.

But Lady Dare was not so well informed.

"I daresay," she remarked graciously, "that we may trust Cicely to see that you do not fail us. I haven't yet sent a card to your cousin Morton," she added in a dubious tone. "Do you think he would come?"

"I'm sure he would if he suspected that you didn't want him," said Archie. "Of course you don't want him."

"Well, under all the circumstances——" began Lady Dare. But the circumstances could not be discussed before her daughters, so she left her sentence unfinished.

"Don't forget to ask Chetwode, by the way," called out Sir George from the other end of the table. "I rode over to call upon him the other day, but he wasn't at home. You've seen him I suppose, Archie?"

"Oh yes, several times," answered Archie. "He was dining with us last night."

"Was he really? I'm very glad to hear that. There was an estrangement, you know, in his father's time—quite uncalled for—and I was afraid this young man might keep it up. And what is he like, eh? Pleasant sort of fellow?"

"I should think most people would call him so," Archie was generous enough to reply; "I haven't talked very much to him myself."

"He is dreadfully impoverished, I understand," observed Lady Dare, with a sigh which was not altogether caused by pity for the impoverished one.

"He can't help that, poor beggar!" returned her good-natured husband.

"He might have helped it, by all accounts. However," added Lady Dare, with another sigh, "it doesn't concern us."

After this there was a long discussion as to who was and who was not coming to the dance, and whether Lord Shoreham would put in an appearance, and whether, if he did, he would behave himself decently, and so forth—all of which was a weariness to Archie, who wanted to get away. He did not get away until the afternoon was well advanced, because he was too young to have acquired that art of creating a pause which very few people acquire before middle age, and in his clumsy efforts to emancipate himself he only succeeded in snubbing everybody.

When at length he had taken his leave, the eldest Miss Dare remarked:

"That young man has far too high an opinion of himself."

It was to her brother that she expressed this opinion, and probably she had reason for believing that it would not be unwelcome to him, since she had led him out into the garden to deliver it.

But Bobby answered disconsolately, "Oh, I don't know. I shouldn't call him a conceited fellow; and even if he is, he has some right to be."

"Bobby," said Miss Dare, impressively, "you are an utter goose. Nobody who is worth anything is conceited; but of course if you will persist in asserting that Archie Bligh is your superior, which he isn't, you will be believed, because it will naturally be supposed that you ought to know. If I were you I should be ashamed of having so little pluck."

"My dear Jane, what on earth do you mean?" inquired Bobby, with round eyes of astonishment.

"I mean," answered Miss Dare, composedly, "that everybody knows you are in love with Cicely Bligh, and that I know you are quite good enough for her, and that you will never have the slightest chance of

getting what you want unless you are bold enough to declare yourself. Girls don't, as a rule, fall in love with their cousins—and I'm sure there's nothing so desperately fascinating about Archie!—but girls will sometimes marry against their own inclinations to please their fathers. Especially when other people are too stupid or too modest to come forward."

Bobby was much surprised. He had been under the impression that his secret had been most carefully kept; but he was not altogether sorry that his sister, upon whose insight he placed great reliance, had divined it. "The truth is," said he, presently, "that I've no business to ask any girl to marry me. I haven't got any coin, you see."

"But she has—or will have."

"That's just it. Putting everything else aside, wouldn't she think it great cheek of a pauper like me to propose to an heiress?"

"No, she wouldn't. She is not an idiot; and if it is any comfort to you to know that she can read you like a book, you may safely lay that comfort to your soul. Only she will be very apt to despise you if you despise yourself."

Poor Bobby heaved a deep sigh and formed a bold resolution. He was not very sanguine, but, after all, his sister might be right, and could hardly be very far wrong. If one is to be rejected, one may as well be rejected in plain terms as by implication.

CHAPTER XII.

LADY DARE'S BALL

It is the nature of mankind, and perhaps (though one must not venture to affirm this too positively) it is even more the nature of womankind, to desire what seems to

be difficult of attainment, and to despise everything that has either been already attained or may be attained without much exertion. That, at all events, seems the most plausible explanation of the fact that Cicely Bligh patronized her cousin Archie, and snubbed Bobby Dare, both of whom were very nice young men indeed, whilst she took an almost respectful interest in Mark Chetwode, who was past his first youth, who had never been handsome, and who took very little trouble to please her. Mark, as has been mentioned, had dined at the Priory, and it may be added that he had produced a generally favourable impression there. Mr. Bligh had found him clever and exceptionally well-informed upon questions of European politics, Miss Skipwith had been much gratified by his courteous and deferential address, and Morton had liked him as much as he could like anybody except himself—which, to be sure, is not making a strong positive statement, yet must be accounted as strong in a comparative sense. But to Cicely he had scarcely spoken at all; and this naturally interested her, because she could not comprehend why he should be so odd and so very unlike other people.

While Archie was spending a long and weary afternoon with the Dare family, as narrated in the last chapter, Cicely was discussing this abnormal stranger with Mrs. Lowndes; and Mrs. Lowndes, a lean, busy little woman, with iron-grey hair, who had no children, and whose intimate acquaintance with the affairs of every one who dwelt within ten miles of her was proverbial, said:

"My dear, you may depend upon it there is some entanglement. As soon as I had seen the man I said to Robert, 'There is some entanglement.' He has a sort of hopeless look which tells its own tale as plainly as possible. Besides, why is he burying himself down here? Not because he cares a fig for his property, or his tenants, or his neighbours, you may be sure. The whole time that I was talking to him about them he

kept swallowing yawns until his eyes began to water. No! there is a mystery in the case; and if it were not wrong to bet, I would bet you a shilling to sixpence that a woman is at the bottom of it."

Sharp little Mrs. Lowndes was, as we know, both right and wrong. Cicely had no means of verifying the more experienced lady's diagnosis, but it is needless to say that, after that, she was more than ever determined to get at the truth. Mr. Chetwode and his entanglements might not concern her particularly, yet it was intolerable that he should continue to be mysterious. When one holds triumphant sway over the entire countryside one really cannot suffer mysteries to remain unexplained.

And so, when certain parochial matters had been talked over, and Cicely had set out homewards, her thoughts were a good deal occupied with Mr. Chetwode. She was not at all surprised to find Archie loitering at the corner of one of the lanes, nor was she taken in for a moment by his clumsy affectation of a start.

"Do you mean to tell me that you have only just got away from the Rectory?" he asked. "What *can* you have been doing all this time?"

"Have I been a long time? I did not know it was long," returned Cicely. "Mrs. Lowndes and I always have plenty to do when we meet. And how have you been occupying yourself during my absence?"

"Oh, I've been lunching out, too," answered Archie, rather dismally. "I didn't want to be left to the tender mercies of Morton if I could help it, so, as I happened to come across Bobby Dare, and as he asked me to go and lunch at Instowe, I thought I had better accept. It was deadly dull. They are deadly dull people, and they wouldn't talk about anything except that ball of theirs—which will be deadly dull too, I expect."

"Oh, they have made you promise to go to it, then?"

"I don't think I exactly promised; but if I did I can

have a sick headache when the time comes. And I certainly will unless you go. Why can't you go?"

"Well, I told you, you know. I can't be sure that papa will be well enough to be left."

"Oh, but that's only an excuse. Of course you can go if you want to go."

"But why should I want to go? You yourself say that it will be deadly dull, and what inducement have you to offer me beyond that of a waltz or two with you? —and you know, my dear Archie, that unless you have improved very much you are not quite a first-rate dancer."

"I have improved very much," Archie declared. "Moreover, you will have Bobby to dance with, if that's an inducement. Chetwode too, I believe, for they said they must ask him. Would Chetwode be an inducement?"

"An immense one," answered Cicely, decisively. "If he accepts the invitation I will certainly make an effort to do likewise. I can see you and Bobby any day, but it isn't so easy to see Mr. Chetwode, or to get him to talk when one does see him."

Archie grunted.

"I don't know why you should be so anxious to make him talk," he remarked.

"You would know if you had tried and failed. Perhaps he may have nothing to say; but one would like to make sure of that before giving him up. I wonder whether Morton will go. Did they say anything about asking him?"

"Well—yes, they did," Archie replied, with some hesitation.

"Only they had doubts as to the propriety of introducing him to their friends, I suppose. They are wrong, I think. Some day or other he will be Lord of Abbotsport Manor, and then they will be obliged to know him. They ought to send him a card—especially as he is almost sure to refuse."

But when this question was spoken of during dinner, it transpired that Morton took no such ungenerous view of his duty to his neighbours. He said he would certainly show himself at the ball, and did not even seem to think that there was any occasion for him to wait until he was asked. Further, he was clearly of opinion that Mark ought to be there, and must be taken there by main force if necessary.

"London is one thing," he was good enough to explain, "and Abbotsport is another. One can't decline civilities here without giving a good and sufficient reason. It's one of the first duties of a man who is trying to become a country gentleman, to submit to social nuisances and look pleasant."

"Are you trying to become a country gentleman, Morton?" inquired his father, with an air of faintly amused curiosity.

"I've no choice in the matter," replied the heir-apparent, calmly; "that is what I'm bound to be, and I must make up my mind to it. Chetwode isn't situated quite as I am, and I daresay he may be inclined to shirk his burdens. But he mustn't be allowed to shirk them; we'll offer him a lift over to Instowe. He has no trap of his own, I believe."

"Only, as you mean to join us, we shall be four without him," remarked Archie.

"Well," said Morton, composedly, "we can divide ourselves into two carriage loads. In fact we ought to do so, for I am sure Aunt Susan would be grieved beyond measure if her ball dress were crushed. You and the two ladies can take the landau, and I'll drive Chetwode over in the brougham. I suppose the stables do contain an animal who is quiet enough to go in single harness without scaring a nervous man out of his wits?"

Mr. Bligh having intimated that such was probably the case, the subject dropped, and before the date fixed for the ball Morton was at the pains of walking over a

second time to Upton Chetwode and bringing a certain amount of pressure to bear upon one whose inclinations appeared to tend towards seclusion. Mark said he didn't think he would derive much amusement from provincial gaieties, but yielded gracefully when he was informed that it was Miss Bligh's particular wish that he should respond to such advances as his neighbours were able to make to him.

"Cicely went the length of saying that she herself would not put in an appearance unless you did," Morton averred. "She's tremendously in earnest about it: and upon my word I believe she's right. It doesn't do to make oneself unpopular. Just look at me for instance. I expect I hate balls a good deal more than you do, and no one has paid me such a compliment as to say that she would go to Instowe for the pleasure of meeting me; but I shall be there just the same."

In presence of so bright an example Mark could no longer hesitate. He signified his willingness to do all that might be required of him, and accepted with thanks Morton's kind offer of a seat in Mr. Bligh's brougham; and after his visitor had left him he laughed unrestrainedly for several minutes. All this was certainly a little comical. Morton's designs were simple and explicable enough; but what in the world did a young and beautiful heiress mean by throwing herself at his head? During the whole of his career, which, in a social sense, had been tolerably eventful, he had had no such experience; and not unnaturally Cicely sank in his estimation by reason of her supposed importunity. He was, of course, willing enough to marry her, if it came to that, but he was not sure that it would not be a great bore to have to make love to her. His sentiments, in short, were precisely what those of the writer and reader of these words would probably be under similar circumstances; and if the statement of them makes him appear somewhat of a coxcomb, allowance may perhaps be made for him in consideration of his complete misunder-

standing of the case. This was, at any rate, the very last time that any such misconception came within the range of his capacities.

For although, when the proper time arrived, he duly carried out his share of the compact, and was conducted by Morton Bligh to the scene of festivity, Miss Bligh did not see fit to fulfil hers, except in so far as that she was present in the ball-room on his entrance. She seemed quite surprised when he asked her how many dances she could spare him.

"I am very sorry," she answered, "but my card is more than full, and as it is I shall have to throw a good many people over most likely, because I don't think I can stay till the end. But I shall be very glad to introduce you to partners, if you are in want of them."

Mark smilingly declined and fell back, with a distinct feeling of mortification. He had not expected to be so snubbed, nor did he in the least believe, what was nevertheless perfectly true, that Cicely's programme could have been filled up so early in the evening. To be a beauty in London or Paris, or any other large city, is to be one of a certain number of happy and distinguished persons; but to be the beauty of an English county is very generally to shine supreme and alone, and, since it is human to be gregarious, Cicely's admirers numbered just as many young men as there were in the room. Moreover, it was a matter of almost absolute indifference to her whether she danced with A or B; so she had promised three dances in advance to her cousin, and had willingly accorded as many to Bobby Dare, who had rushed forward to implore them immediately upon her arrival.

Mark leant against the wall and watched her, after quieting his conscience by walking through a set of Lancers with the eldest Miss Dare. Her frock was very well cut, he noticed—assuredly it was not the handiwork of a provincial dressmaker—and as for her

beauty, that was what he had never thought of disputing. Only, somehow or other, it attracted him to-night, which it could scarcely be said to have done heretofore. After her very plain invitation to him, he could only account for her behaviour upon the supposition that she was either capricious or a coquette, and the uncertainty stimulated his curiosity.

In reality she was quite as much disappointed as he was that her engagements did not permit of her dancing with him, and she also thought him rather tiresome for having been so dilatory about presenting himself. But upon further consideration she remembered that the delay was probably rather Morton's fault than his; so that it seemed a little unfair to make him suffer for it. Consulting her programme she found that she had promised the fourteenth dance to Archie and the fifteenth to Bobby; and, with that unscrupulousness which all women, unhappily, are wont to exhibit in their dealings with those whom they have brought into subjection, she determined to ask each of them to let her off. She used no deception in the matter; she told them both candidly that she wished to dance with Mr. Chetwode, and that she relied upon their good-nature to enable her to do as she wished. And having been granted the release, which could hardly be refused, she requested her partner to conduct her to Mr. Chetwode, whom she informed that, after all, she could manage to give him numbers fourteen and fifteen, if he cared to have them.

"You are very kind," he replied, with that deferential, un-English bow of his. "I was thinking of going away; but now I shall most thankfully remain. I only wish I could flatter myself that, as a partner, I should prove worthy of you."

He danced, as many Russians do, after the German fashion—that is to say, admirably in respect of time and smoothness, yet with a manner of holding himself and his partner which was a little uncomfortable to a

lady who had never been out of England. Perhaps it was because she did not get on with him quite as well as she had expected, perhaps it was (as she alleged) because the evening was far advanced and she was tired out, but more probably it was because she desired to test his conversational rather than his waltzing powers that Cicely proposed to sit out the remainder of the time at her disposal. At all events, she obtained his assent, of which she lost no time in taking advantage. Hitherto, this man had baffled her; and to be baffled was an altogether novel experience for Miss Bligh. She put forth all her powers, which were very great (is not the power of any young and beautiful woman enormous?), to break down the barrier of his polite reserve, and it need scarcely be said that she was successful. She made him talk about himself; she led him on to speak of subjects which he was not in the habit of discussing; she did not, it is true, hear anything about Madame Souravieff—because one must draw the line somewhere—but she learnt that Mr. Chetwode was a weary and unhappy man, that he had lost all his illusions and did not know where to find fresh ones; also that sympathy was very pleasant and very welcome to him.

And he, for his part, was perfectly sincere. He not only seemed to be fascinated, but really was fascinated. Being no fool, he very soon perceived that Cicely was neither in love with him nor anxious to make him fall in love with her. He had never met a woman at all like her before—had never, indeed, had the chance of so doing—and her combination of audacity and innocence touched some chord or other in his heart which through the whole of his previous life had remained intact. It was with quite spontaneous honesty that he paid her a very pretty compliment at length.

"You understand a great deal," he said. "How is it that you have come to understand so much without ever leaving Abbotsport?"

"What is the difference between Abbotsport and other places?" she asked, laughing.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose you are right; it is always the same story over and over again; only sometimes it is printed in big type and sometimes in small. Still one does not meet every day with a person whose eyes are clear enough to read the small type. And is that enough for you? Will you have philosophy enough to live always contentedly in a microcosm?"

"If that were to be my fate I don't think I should complain of it," answered Cicely; "but it is not at all likely to be my fate."

"Doesn't one's fate very much depend upon oneself?"

"Yours may, and I daresay it does; but mine will be settled for me by other people. Here comes Bobby, looking very sad and reproachful; I must go and dance with him, poor boy! And you can go home to bed, as I see that you are dying to do. Take the brougham, if you want it; we will make room for Morton, and put Archie up on the box."

But Mark, instead of going home, remained where he was for a time, and watched her while she danced. "It is not going to be such a simple affair after all," he thought to himself. Indeed, there were several reasons why the line of action upon which he had resolved seemed less easy to carry out than it had at first appeared. To begin with, he had discovered that Miss Bligh's intelligence was above the average; then he suspected that although, like most women, she coveted admiration, her head was not likely to be turned by it; finally—and this was most serious of all—his own head was no longer as cool as he could have wished it to be. He was conscious of certain once familiar sensations, from the recurrence of which he had believed himself to be permanently delivered; he was conscious, too, of a decided loss of self-confidence and increase of anxiety.

"No, it isn't going to be simple," he repeated; as he rose and made for the door. "However, that will, at least, make it more interesting."

CHAPTER XIII.

BOBBY IS PUT OUT OF SUSPENSE

WHILE Cicely was producing the impression above mentioned upon Mark Chetwode, while Archie from a distant point of vantage was glaring at the unconscious couple, and while the remainder of the assembled company were, it may be hoped, enjoying themselves after their several fashions, Bobby Dare was in a condition of tumultuous mental excitement. That very evening—so he had determined—he was to hear whether life thenceforth should mean for him a hopeful effort towards some realizable ideal or merely a daily round of monotonous duty. Either way, he was going to be relieved from suspense, which is always a stirring prospect. His sister Jane had patted him on the back and encouraged him very much, but that is what one's sister Jane may generally be relied upon to do; and if one be a sensible man, like Bobby, one makes allowance for her partiality while duly appreciating it, and is not specially elated by her sanguine anticipations. Bobby was very far from being sanguine, yet he was glad, as every brave man ought to be, that the time for decisive action had arrived; and so, after he had danced with Cicely for a minute or two, he asked her whether she would mind coming with him into the library. "Because," said he, "I want to tell you something."

"I shall be delighted," she answered, unhesitatingly. "I have had more than enough dancing for one night, and if you can tell me anything of a nature to amuse or interest me I shall be truly grateful."

The library was deserted, and in the way of illumination had but two shaded lamps (a concession to modern social requirements which Lady Dare had only sanctioned after a struggle), the bay windows had been thrown open, and beside one of them was an armchair, of which Cicely promptly took possession.

"Well," said she, as soon as Bobby had seated himself, with his elbows on his knees, upon an old-fashioned stool in front of her, "speak on. I am accustomed to receiving confidences; nobody gets more of them than I do, and if I were not so discreet I could tell you all the domestic secrets of Abbotsport. What is your particular trouble? Have you been falling desperately in love with somebody, after the manner of sailors? And has she snubbed you?"

Perhaps this was rather a cruel speech; but then it must be apparent to everybody that there are occasions upon which one is cruel only to be kind. Bobby neither took the hint nor resented it.

"First of all," he answered, "I wanted to tell you that I've been appointed to the *Cygnet*, and that I shall have to join in a few days."

"It is very ignorant of me, but I really don't know whether I ought to congratulate you or not. Where is the *Cygnet?* And what is she going to do?"

"Oh, it's a matter for congratulation, I think. I shall be on the East India Station—in the Persian Gulf or the Red Sea, most likely—and one might be worse off than that. There's always the chance of active service in putting down the slave trade, you see. But what I have made up my mind to say to you to-night—because I'm sure it's better to say it and have done with it—is that whatever happens to me in the future will be good or bad or indifferent, just as you may decide."

Cicely assumed an air of astonishment which she did not feel.

"I don't understand how that can be," she declared.

"But of course you do understand," returned Bobby, who was a very straightforward young man. "You understand quite well, Cicely, that I love you, and that I have never loved any one but you. I haven't said so before, but you knew it without my saying so; and now I want you to tell me honestly whether it's an altogether hopeless business or not. I can do with a very little bit of hope," he added, modestly, "if you can give it me."

Cicely burst out laughing. Her laughter might have struck a dispassionate observer as being a trifle forced, but it would have been most unreasonable to expect of a matter-of-fact and amorous young sailor that he should be in a position to make dispassionate observations.

"My dear Bobby," she exclaimed, "you are very flattering, but you are a little bit absurd, you know. Didn't I tell you you were in love with somebody? Well, by this time next year you will be in love with somebody else, that's all. And then, if there's and gratitude in you, you will be thankful to me, I hope, for not having taken you too seriously."

"That isn't a fair way to answer me, Cicely. You may refuse me, and I suppose you will; but you aren't heartless enough to laugh at me, and you needn't pretend that you are. I know you better than that."

Cicely was a little surprised, and showed she was so by a change in her voice.

"But, Bobby," she remonstrated, "how would you have me answer you? You are only a boy."

"So you say; still the fact remains that I am a man. If you tell me that you don't care for me, and never can care for me, there's an end of it; only I'm sure you can't think me absurd. It wasn't absurd to love you. It may be presumptuous perhaps; that I quite admit."

If he had been as clever as he was stupid, and as designing as he was honest, he could not have put the case more effectively; for he touched Cicely's heart and

made her feel ashamed of herself. Nevertheless, she shook her head.

"I am very sorry, Bobby," she said, "but you mustn't think about it any more. I hope you won't think about it any more—or, at any rate, not for long. You oughtn't to call me heartless because I can't help remembering how young you are. You haven't seen a great many women yet, have you? And just think what a dreadful thing it would be to be bound to one, and then to find that there was another whom you liked better."

"I daresay it would be dreadful if it were possible," answered Bobby; "only in my case it isn't possible. However, I suppose you mean me to understand that there's no chance for me?"

Cicely, by silence, signified assent. The moon, which was nearly at the full, shone in through the open window, and fell upon the features of the handsome, dejected-looking young fellow who sat facing her. She had never meant to flirt with him; she had never meant to give a moment of pain to his honest heart. Certainly she had known he was an admirer of hers; but then so many people were admirers of hers! Yet, while she looked at him, her conscience pricked her, and at length she said:

"I haven't—I hope you don't think I have—encouraged you, Bobby?"

"Oh no," he replied, with a dreary little laugh; "you cannot be accused of having done that. Only there seemed to be just the least shadow of a hope, and as I am going away for such a long time I thought I would rather hear the truth before I started; and then Jane kept on telling me that I should never get what I wanted if I hadn't the pluck to ask for it—which was sensible enough, I daresay."

The counsels of Jane were no doubt sensible in the abstract, but it was scarcely sensible to quote them to Cicely, whose manner at once underwent a slight change.

"Oh," said she, "you have been making a *confidante* of Jane, then?"

In truth there was no great love lost between her and Miss Dare, who was strong-minded and managing, and whom she suspected (with perfect justice) of being desirous that her brother should marry a rich woman.

"I didn't exactly confide in her," answered Bobby. "She guessed what was the matter with me, and when she taxed me with it in plain terms I couldn't contradict her. So then she urged me not to put off speaking until it might be too late."

"Your sister," observed Cicely, "doesn't seem to give me credit for knowing my own mind. Did she think that it was a question of who might happen to speak first?"

"No, only she thought—— But perhaps you will be offended if I tell you what she thought."

"Perhaps I shall," answered Cicely; "but I wish to hear it, all the same. Go on."

And so accustomed was Bobby to obey this imperious young lady that he did not venture to dispute her pleasure.

"Well," he began, "I was afraid—of course I don't know whether I am right or wrong, and I mustn't ask—but for some time past I have been very much afraid of Archie. Jealous of him, in short, if I must speak the plain truth."

"Yes," said Cicely, with an unmoved countenance, for indeed this was no news to her.

Bobby looked wistfully at her for a moment, and then resumed:

"Naturally I can't help knowing that Archie is a cut above me in almost everything, except, perhaps, in sailing a boat; but Jane, you see——"

"Jane, quite as naturally, has a less humble opinion of you. So far, I am entirely with Jane. Well?"

"Well, she wouldn't allow that, on our merits, there was much difference between us; but she has an idea that your father wants you to marry Archie, and that

you may do it in order to please him. I've been thinking a good deal about it since," continued Bobby, as the girl remained silent, "and it seems to me that it really is a danger. A danger for you, I mean; as for me, no doubt I shouldn't have been any better off if Archie had never been born."

And, with a certain unstudied eloquence which was not ineffective, he proceeded to expatiate upon the fatal consequences which must necessarily result from a marriage of convenience. He declared—and his face proved his sincerity—that he cared far more for her happiness than for his own, that he could very well bear to hear that she had married a man whom she loved, and that he had always known that he himself could hardly win her love by anything short of a miracle; but to hear that from motives of expediency she had married a man whom she did not really love would, he confessed, be to him the very worst news possible, and he implored her not to sacrifice herself in so useless a way.

Cicely's response to his appeal was scarcely satisfactory to him.

"Perhaps," said she, "the simplest plan is not to marry at all. I don't think I have ever met anybody except my father whom I should care to live with always; and you are completely mistaken if you imagine that he wishes me to marry against my will."

"Perhaps he doesn't," answered Bobby, doubtfully, "but everybody seems to think that he has set his heart upon your marrying Archie. And small blame to him if he has! Although I do trust you won't oblige him, unless—unless——"

Cicely shut up her fan with a sudden impatient rattle.

"Oh, the chances are that I shall live and die an old maid," she said. "No doubt there are plenty of women who can manage to think their husbands paragons of perfection, but I can't believe myself capable of such

imbecility, and if one didn't think the man a paragon, I don't see how one could escape abhorring him. The whole question is one of imagination from beginning to end, and my imagination has always been defective."

That was probably true; and it was certainly true that she was as yet fancy free. If any one had contrived to find a soft place in her heart, that person was no other than the modest Bobby himself; but of course such an avowal could not be made without a risk of misconception.

And now this interview was brought to an abrupt close by the entrance of Archie, who marched up to the couple in a state of ill-disguised irritation, to say that he had been looking for them all over the place, that the carriage was at the door, and that everybody was going away.

"Chetwode appears to have appropriated the brougham," he added. "Pretty cool of him, I must say. We shall have to stow Morton away somehow."

He was not much mollified when his cousin rejoined:

"That is my fault; I told Mr. Chetwode he could have the brougham. The carriage holds four, but anyhow you won't mind sitting on the box on such a lovely night, will you? I thought you would be glad to have the chance of a cigar."

Archie grunted; and while Cicely, who had risen, was making her way towards the ball-room, to say good-night to her entertainers, he muttered to Bobby:

"That brute has been swilling champagne the whole evening. If we could have got away a little sooner, there might have been some hope of his being able to behave himself; but by this time he must be as drunk as an owl. I'd put him on the box, only I suppose he'd roll off."

Morton was subsequently offered the box-seat, which he declined, with thanks. He was not drunk, but he might without much exaggeration have been called

tipsy. He was also in high spirits; for he had witnessed from a distance his sister's prolonged conversation with Mark Chetwode, and Archie's evident ill-humour struck him in the light of a capital joke. He beguiled the homeward way with some facetious sallies at the expense of Lady Dare's guests, most of which were expressed in language which shocked Miss Skipwith beyond measure, and consequently amused Cicely. The latter was in need of any amusement that she could obtain, because her own spirits were somewhat depressed. She had an uncomfortable feeling that she had not behaved very well to poor Bobby, and a still more uncomfortable feeling that he had behaved with a good deal of magnanimity to her; she could have wished also to explain to him—had it seemed possible to do that without exciting false hopes—that she was not, and never had been, in love with any man, and that she believed herself to be constitutionally incapable of such emotions. But there are things which it is always extremely difficult to say, because nobody will ever believe them; so that perhaps it was just as well for Bobby's peace of mind that his entreaties had been met by an uncompromising negative. After all he was very young, and the wounds of young people heal quickly.

Meanwhile Morton, encouraged by his aunt's deprecatory murmurs and his sister's laughter, was not mincing matters. Not a good word had he to say for a single person whom he had met that evening, except Mark Chetwode, whom he boldly averred to be the only civilized human being in the entire countryside.

"Chetwode is a gentleman," said he. "Clever fellow too—uncommonly clever fellow. Not much use for the Miss Dares to set their caps at him, I can tell them."

"Perhaps they won't," observed Cicely. "He isn't such a very great catch, you see."

"My dear girl," returned her brother, with much solemnity, "a man like Chetwode would be a catch if he hadn't a brass farthing in the world. You may take my word for that. He'll get into Parliament and distinguish himself, you'll see; he won't be content to vegetate down here all his life. I should say," continued Morton with as much gravity and deliberation as if he had known what he was talking about, "that with a little capital—of course a little capital is necessary to start with—Chetwode might rise to almost any position."

And it is highly probable that he would have proceeded to hint in plain terms at the quarter whence the requisite capital might appropriately be derived, had he not been preserved from wrecking his schemes in that way by the termination of the drive.

CHAPTER XIV.

MR. BLIGH STATES HIS INTENTIONS

ONE fine morning, not long after the ball at which he had entertained his friends and acquaintances, Sir George Dare mounted his old bay horse, and lost a button off the back of his trousers in the process. This, coming on the top of other vexatious incidents, saddened him and brought gloomy ideas into his mind; so that he shook his head very mournfully as he jogged down the drive.

"It comes to this," he sighed, "that I must either give up wearing braces altogether, or have the library steps brought out every time that I want to get upon a horse's back. A pretty state of things for a man of my age, who has always led an abstemious life!"

As, however, his temperament was optimistic, and as exercise and fresh air always did him good, he presently

became more cheerful, remembering that, after all, he might be a great deal worse off. There was poor Bligh, for instance, to whom he was about to pay a neighbourly visit—Bligh, who was his junior by a long way and was a helpless cripple, simply waiting for death.

"Waiting for death," soliloquized Sir George, "that's all that can be said about him; and with no prospect of dying comfortably either; for it must be deuced unpleasant to have such a rascal of a son, and see him standing there ready to step into your shoes. Thank God, I've no cause to be ashamed of any son of mine—though I wish one of 'em wasn't such a stoopid young ass!"

Sir George, who was fond of Bobby and proud of him, would have turned purple with anger if anybody else had ventured so to describe the Benjamin of the family; but it certainly was tiresome of the boy to have abortive love affairs and bolt off to London on some flimsy pretext before his leave had expired. Bobby had departed, and the flimsy pretext alluded to had been outwardly acquiesced in; but the mishap which had befallen him was no secret to any of his near relations, because he had been unable to conceal it from Jane, and Jane had imparted it to her mother, who had told Sir George, and reticence had never been one of Sir George's many fine qualities. Not that he meant to say a word about the matter to Bligh; that would be a very useless and undignified thing to do. Girls must be allowed to choose their own husbands, or at any rate to reject aspirants whom they may have the bad taste not to fancy, and Lady Dare was much mistaken in thinking that Cicely was the sort of girl who would submit to have a husband chosen for her.

As a matter of fact, Lady Dare did not think so; but Jane did. Jane was convinced that unless some disinterested person intervened Cicely would be talked into marrying her cousin, and Jane's conviction, which had reached her father's ears, may have had something to do

with that honest gentleman's sudden anxiety to inform himself as to the state of poor Bligh's health. But if so he was quite unconscious of it. He had told Lady Dare, who had suggested the intervention of the disinterested person, that that was all stuff and nonsense, and although he had agreed with her that it would be very nice if Bobby were to make a good marriage, and had not disputed her assertion that Bobby was both handsomer and more lovable than Archie, he had at the same time reminded her that Cicely appeared to be of a different opinion.

On reaching the Priory he was informed that Mr. Bligh was out in the garden, and there, reclining in a sheltered, sunny spot, he found the invalid, whom he greeted with much heartiness.

"Well, Bligh," said he, "it's a great pleasure to see you out of doors again, I'm sure! And how are you? Progressing, I hope—progressing, eh?"

"Oh, I'm progressing," answered Mr. Bligh, with a little laugh. "In fact I may say that I'm progressing very fast indeed—down the hill."

Sir George began to say: "Oh, nonsense, my dear fellow, you mustn't talk like that! You're all right; we shall have you about again before long." But while he was speaking he looked at the other's pale, waxen face, and suddenly felt ashamed of uttering such absurdities; so that his sentence, which had started so bravely, died away feebly before reaching its conclusion.

To relieve his embarrassment Mr. Bligh at once changed the subject, and presently made some inquiry about Bobby, which enabled Sir George to say:

"Ah, poor boy, I'm here partly on his behalf. Asked me to say good-bye to you all for him. He has been ordered off to the East India Station, you know."

"So Cicely told me," observed Mr. Bligh; "but I didn't know that he had to join his ship immediately."

"He won't have to join for a week or two, I believe; but he said he must go up to London to get his outfit.

The fact of the matter is that he wanted to get away—and no fool he! *I* didn't attempt to detain him, though of course his mother was distressed."

Sir George glanced at Mr. Bligh and saw that his meaning had been understood. He did not, however, obtain much comfort or encouragement from the latter, who only smiled and remarked:

"He is one of a tolerably large number. Happily for him he is a sailor, and sailors have short memories."

"I don't know so much about that," returned Sir George, rather grumpily; "we Dares aren't weather-cocks, whatever we may be. At the same time, I am quite aware—and so I told his mother—that you have other intentions. No doubt it's just as well that he should get away, poor fellow! How long do you expect your son to stay with you?"

"He hasn't spoken to me about his plans," Mr. Bligh answered, "but I should think that, under the circumstances, he would see the propriety of being in at the death. It's customary, you know; and I have been much impressed of late by Morton's earnest desire to do what is customary."

Sir George suddenly broke out into strong language. As a matter of principle, no one was more firmly convinced than he that it is both wrong and unlike a gentleman to swear; but surely it is justifiable to resort to any remedy in order to secure yourself against a fit of apoplexy, and his good friend Bligh had the knack of exasperating him beyond endurance. His observations were somewhat incoherent, but the upshot of them was that it was downright disgusting; and Mr. Bligh agreed meditatively that perhaps it was rather disgusting, when you came to think of it. The situation, however, was not of his creating, and he was at a loss to understand why he was being scolded.

Sir George said:

"Nobody is scolding you, Bligh; but if you don't want to make a man lose his temper—I believe that's

just what you do want, though—you shouldn't talk in such an unnatural way."

"I thought I was suiting myself to my subject," answered Mr. Bligh, mildly. "For the matter of that, nothing that happens is unnatural. Otherwise it couldn't happen, you see."

This puzzled Sir George, who rubbed the back of his head and endeavoured to argue the point. Thus he was led away into an irrelevant discussion, and had not yet ascertained whether the Abbotsport property was really to pass into the hands of the obnoxious Morton or not, when the colloquy was interrupted by Archie's appearance upon the scene.

That young man, who strolled up with his hands in his pockets, looked as if he didn't know what to do with himself—which indeed was his case. He said disconsolately that Cicely had gone off somewhere to visit the poor, as usual, and that Morton was asleep in the smoking-room—also as usual. After which he sat down upon the ground and heaved a profound sigh. Sir George chatted for a few minutes longer, and then took his leave, saying:

"Well, I ought to be going home or I shall be late for luncheon. Very glad to have seen you, Bligh, and —and—I hope you'll be better soon. And you must keep up your spirits, you know—you must keep up your spirits!"

"He's a good old fellow, that," remarked Archie, when the worthy baronet was out of hearing. "Did he come over here just to ask how you were?"

"He is a very good old fellow," replied Mr. Bligh, "although I don't think he came over solely for that purpose. I believe that one of his reasons for coming was that he—or possibly Lady Dare—is very anxious to know whether I mean my son to inherit this place."

"What business is that of theirs?"

"It is to some extent their business. One can't be altogether independent of one's neighbours, and there is

a certain kind of neighbour who can give one a good deal of annoyance if he chooses. However, I didn't tell Sir George what my intentions were. But I think," added Mr. Bligh, after a short pause, "that I will tell *you*, if you don't mind listening to me for a minute or two. Now that my mind is made up, I should like you to know it. Did it ever occur to you that I might put you in Morton's place?".

"No," answered the young man, looking up wonderingly, "I can't say that it ever did."

"I am glad of that; because I don't mean to commit such an act of injustice, much as I should like to commit it. If I felt free to consult my own inclinations, I should choose to be succeeded by somebody who would be content to lead the ordinary life of an English country gentleman. I have been interested in my tenants, and in the fishing people, and I have tried to do what I could for them, and the idea that my work will be either undone or allowed to die a natural death isn't, of course, quite pleasant to me. Still I couldn't deprive Morton of his birthright. After thinking it over, that is the conclusion to which I have come. The excuse, it seems to me, would be insufficient, and I need not weary you by going into reasons and particulars. But I have thought myself justified in leaving him only a life interest in the estates, which will pass on his death to his eldest son, or, if he never has any sons, to Cicely. For you I have made such provision as it seemed right and reasonable to make. You won't be a rich man, Archie, but you will be independent—which, after all, means much the same thing."

Archie made the unintelligible mumble which is all that can be expected of a man to whom an announcement of that kind has been made, and a pause ensued. Then Mr. Bligh, who had been scrutinizing the young man with a faintly amused air, resumed:

"I wonder whether you would mind my speaking to you with brutal and unceremonious frankness?"

Archie raised his blue eyes wonderingly and answered: "I don't mind your saying anything that you want to ay, Uncle Wilfrid."

"Thank you. Well, I want to say something that may perhaps make you blush; but I will look the other way while I'm saying it. You must try to forgive an unemployed cripple for having had eyes sharp enough to perceive that you are smitten with my daughter, and maybe you will forgive me the more easily when I tell you that it has given me the greatest possible satisfaction to perceive that such is the case. If I had to choose a husband for her out of the whole world, I should choose you; and—in short, my dear fellow, I wish you good luck with all my heart."

Here Mr. Bligh held out his hand to his nephew, who took it, expressing his gratitude as warmly as a somewhat limited vocabulary would allow. He thought his uncle was treating him with very great kindness and generosity, and he said as much.

"Well, no," answered the elder man, laughing, "I'm afraid I can't claim much credit for either. You have all the personal qualities that one is entitled to ask for in a son-in-law, but, in addition to that, circumstances give you a special value in my eyes. I suppose feeling one's end so near makes one a little wanting in delicacy and inclined to say things which, as a general rule, are only hinted at, but as I have begun by being so candid, I may as well go on. Looking to the future, I can't but be aware that Morton is not likely to marry, and that his life is not likely to be a long one. Consequently I foresee that some day my place may be taken by Cicely's husband, and it would be a comfort to me to know that Cicely's husband will be one of my own blood. I only mention this by way of explaining myself; your own good sense will tell you that it would be a very great mistake for you to count upon chances, or even upon probabilities. I trust I haven't shocked you by my cold-bloodedness."

It is not impossible that Archie might have been just the least bit in the world shocked, had he been in a calmer condition of mind; but as it was he was too excited and anxious for criticism, and what he chiefly wanted to know was whether he could at once declare himself to Cicely with any prospect of success.

"Really," said his uncle, laughing, "you ought to be a better judge of that than I. I can't, of course, do anything to help you; all I can say is that you have my best wishes."

This was, no doubt, the proper attitude to take up, and, whatever may be thought of Mr. Bligh's discretion, it cannot be said that up to that point he had used any undue influence for the furtherance of his schemes. But later in the day he did, though without intending it, transgress to some extent the limits of strict neutrality. Cicely—as indeed was a common enough practice with her—did not put in an appearance at luncheon, but at five o'clock she found her father in the library and seated herself by his side to pour out his tea for him; and then it was that she heard the news of Bobby's precipitate departure, which seemed both to distress and anger her.

"He might at least have taken the trouble to come and say good-bye to us," she remarked.

"Taking everything into consideration," answered Mr. Bligh, with a smile, "perhaps some allowance may be made for his bad manners."

"Oh, you know, then?"

"Well, I can guess. Sir George didn't leave a great deal to my imagination, though we avoided particulars. From your guilty expression, I presume that the poor youth must have gone the length of putting a plain question and getting a plain answer."

Cicely nodded, rather sadly. She was not much given to confidences, but she had never had any secrets from her father, and she was the more willing now to tell him what had occurred because her conscience was ill at

ease. Did he, she asked, consider that she had behaved badly? Had she been to blame? Did he think that Bobby was very angry with her?

"It seems so horrid and cruel to have sent him away like this before his time; and I am afraid his people will hate me for it," she said, penitently.

Mr. Bligh, however, could not be brought to view this matter in a serious light. He was one of the most kind-hearted men in the world, but he had forgotten, or perhaps had never known, the sufferings attendant upon unrequited love, and he did not think it probable that a healthy young sailor would find much difficulty in forgetting the girl he had left behind him. These unromantic sentiments he imparted to Cicely, and was amused to notice that if they reassured her they did not altogether please her. Women may always be trusted to think kindly of a disconsolate lover; but, whatever they may say, they can't readily pardon a lover who has found consolation.

And it may be that her father's philosophical remarks produced a certain effect upon Cicely, which, to do him justice, he had not meant to produce; for when, as seemed but natural after such a conversation, he went on to speak of other admirers of hers, and mentioned one in particular whom, if he were in her place, he should rate more highly than all the rest put together, she only shrugged her shoulders and said:

"Oh, he is very nice and I like him very much. I daresay he would do as well as anybody, if there must be somebody. But must there be somebody?"

"No," answered Mr. Bligh; "but I hope there will be somebody. You don't like me to say I sha'n't be here much longer; yet that is what I am always thinking of, and I am quite sure I should have a better chance of living for another year or so if I were easy in my mind about you."

In saying this he unquestionably went further than he ought to have done; but he conceived himself to be

merely stating a fact. Nothing could have been less in accordance with his desires than that his life should be prolonged by his daughter's marriage with a man whom she did not love. His own impression was that she really did love Archie, but that she probably was not as yet aware of it. It had always been so much a matter of course that every young man who came near her should prostrate himself before her. So that there seemed to be no great harm in saying what an honest, manly young fellow Archie was, and how straight he had always kept, although his regiment had the name of being a fast one, and what a good sportsman he had shown himself, and how well he seemed to be adapted for country life.

"I was telling him this morning," continued Mr. Bligh with a sigh, "that I would very much rather leave the Priory to him than to Morton, who will hate the place. But that can't be."

"I suppose not," said Cicely, doubtfully.

"Oh no; it wouldn't do. I hesitated for a time, but my mind is quite made up now. Morton must have the place for life, and the remainder must be to his son, supposing that he ever has a son. Happily, I can leave you a considerable sum of money without pinching him, and I have always intended to provide for Archie. Supposing that things should fall out as they may, you and he, by putting your means together, would have enough to live the sort of life that I should like to think of you as living. I mean that you could have a moderate-sized country house and a sufficiency of horses. Sometimes I have thought that possibly Upton Chetwode might suit you. But these are only a sick man's fancies," concluded Mr. Bligh, laughing. "I amuse myself with fancies, having so little else to do. Occasionally also I torment myself; and in one of my blackest visions I see you established in a London house, with your Aunt Susan mounting guard over you. Heavens! how wretched you would be!"

Well, at any rate, this man was not selfish. Perhaps he did not know what was most likely to ensure his daughter's happiness: perhaps he did not sufficiently realize that the destiny of every individual on earth is, or ought to be, the property of that individual. All his life he had been accustomed to be a ruler, and in some measure to sway the destinies of a large number of dependents. But of himself he had thought little enough; and this was what struck Cicely, as she rose and looked down upon his somewhat wistful face.

"You are always doing things, or wanting to do things, for other people, papa," she said. "We must try to show our gratitude by pleasing ourselves, in order to please you."

Then she bent down and kissed him and left the room. There were tears in her eyes, he noticed, and he wondered why. He did not, however, imagine that they were caused by any dread of the future which he had sketched out for her.

CHAPTER XV.

MARK MAKES PEACE

HER father's avowal of his wishes did not come upon Cicely as any surprise. She had divined them some time back—in truth they had not been very carefully disguised—and although he had not been quite as explicit with her as he had been with Archie, he might have been so and yet told her little that she did not already understand. Evidently there was something more than a possibility that Morton might die without issue, and just as evidently it must have been necessary to make arrangements for the succession, in that event, of a Bligh worthy of the name. Now there was but one such man in

existence besides the present owner of the property; and what could be more natural than that that owner should desire to bring about a match which in time might have the effect of restoring his daughter to the position of authority and beneficence of which his own demise would deprive her? The match, in fact, was undoubtedly a desirable one. Cicely was able to contemplate it without repugnance, if without enthusiasm. She was not in love with Archie, but then she was not in love with anybody else, nor likely to be, and she worshipped her father. Her feeling at the moment was that if, by marrying her cousin, she could relieve her father's mind of anxiety and so prolong his life, she would not hesitate for a moment to make what, after all, could hardly be called a sacrifice. Nobody, at any rate, should suspect that it was a sacrifice. One must do these things with a good grace if one is to do them at all; and why Cicely, who was not given to weeping, should have found it necessary to dry her eyes at frequent intervals for half an hour after coming to this conclusion it would be useless to inquire, since she herself did not know. She supposed that she was crying because she hated so to talk or think about her father's death—which, to be sure, was a plausible reason enough.

When she had dressed for dinner she returned to the library, where she found an unexpected guest in conversation with her father.

"You will think that I am developing into a very obstrusive neighbour," Mark Chetwode said, as he rose to shake hands with her, "but your brother must bear the blame. He came to see me this afternoon and insisted on bringing me back with him, though I assure you that I defended myself to the best of my power."

"Didn't you want to come, then?" asked Cicely, laughing.

"Ah, that is a question which requires no answer. But I know that in England a man who presents him-

self at the dinner-hour without an invitation takes a very great liberty. In Russia it is different."

"My dear sir, didn't I invite you?" called out Morton from the armchair in which he was lounging at the other end of the room. "Let it be supposed that we are Russians, if that will make you any happier."

"Mr. Chetwode will be good enough to suppose nothing of the kind," returned Cicely. "We are English, and so is he: and if he were anything else he wouldn't be half as welcome as he is, I can tell him."

In point of fact, his presence was particularly welcome to her that evening; because, after what had passed between her and her father, she was conscious of a novel and not very agreeable sensation of embarrassment which prevented her from talking to Archie with her accustomed freedom. Her father, she was aware, had been making confidential statements to Archie as well as to her, and it was more than probable that he had received confidential statements in return. Under the circumstances, it was a relief to have to exert oneself for the entertainment of an outsider.

No great exertion, however, was required in order to entertain Mr. Chetwode upon this occasion. It was rather he who exerted himself, and when he chose to exert himself he could be very pleasant company. Without seeming to take any trouble about it (though of course such a thing can't be done without a good deal of trouble), he contrived to draw everybody round the dinner-table into a conversation which he turned hither and thither as he pleased. What was more, he managed to put them all upon pretty good terms with themselves, and consequently with him. Meanwhile he kept his faculties of observation on the alert and made a few trifling discoveries. It did not take him long to detect Archie's subdued excitement and Cicely's somewhat forced gaiety, nor was he slow to note the circumstance that Mr. Bligh's eyes kept wandering from his daughter to his nephew and back again. But these

things were far from disquieting him. The first act of the little domestic drama was drawing towards a close, he thought, and its conclusion would clear the ground. Obviously the nephew, strongly supported by the uncle, was about to make his proposal; obviously, too, he was about to be rejected: for Mark was convinced that Cicely's affection for her cousin was of a pure cousinly nature. He, for his part, therefore, had at present nothing to do but to bide his time and make himself unobtrusively agreeable.

"My dear," said Miss Skipwith to Cicely, when the two ladies had returned to the drawing-room, a vast apartment which was seldom occupied at any other hour of the day, "I don't, as you know, pretend to any great insight into character, but it does seem to me that Mr. Chetwode is a most remarkable man."

"Very remarkable," agreed Cicely, who was not thinking about Mr. Chetwode at the moment.

"He has so much more information than most of the young men whom one meets nowadays; and then his manners are so very superior to theirs! To be sure it is no great compliment to him to say that; because some of them really have no manners at all. Look at your cousin Archie, for instance. I daresay he doesn't mean to be rude, but he has a way of yawning under one's very nose which I can't think gentlemanlike; and, to my mind, he is not nearly careful enough about the language that he uses in the presence of ladies."

"Has he been saying anything indecent?" asked Cicely, absently.

"My *dear* Cicely! Of course I only meant that he was too much given to slang expressions. Mr. Chetwode, if you have noticed, never interlards his conversation with slang. Mr. Chetwode, in short," concluded Miss Skipwith, emphatically, "is a thorough gentleman."

"The inference," observed Cicely, "is flattering to us all. If Archie isn't a gentleman I suppose the rest of

us must be snobs; for there's no getting over the fact that his blood is the same as ours."

"It is not altogether a question of blood, my dear; and I am sure that I never denied that your cousin was a gentleman. One may disapprove of a person notwithstanding his being a gentleman by birth."

That Miss Skipwith disapproved of Archie was an old story, and her motives for so doing were no secret to her niece: but when, encouraged by the latter's silence, the old lady went on to say that no true gentleman was scheming or self-seeking, that greed of money was peculiarly repellent in the young, and a good deal more to the like effect, Cicely grew a little impatient.

"If I wanted to create a prejudice against any one, I should not set to work in your way, Aunt Susan," she remarked. "One can hardly expect to succeed unless one can hit upon some charges which have at least a faint show of probability about them. But of course you're not a good calumniator, you poor old Aunt Susan," she added, softening at the sight of Miss Skipwith's conscience-stricken countenance; "how should you be? And you're quite wrong about Archie—if that matters."

So saying she moved towards the piano, by way of closing the convesration, while Miss Skipwith sighed heavily.

In the dining-room things were not going on quite so smoothly as they had done before the departure of the ladies. As soon as the men were left to themselves Mr. Bligh apologized to his guest, and requested his son to do the honours for him. He had had a rather tiring day, he said, and felt quite worn out.

"I daresay Mr. Chetwode will kindly excuse my lack of ceremony in consideration of my infirmity."

So his servant was rung for, and presently he was wheeled away.

"Breaking up fast," remarked Morton, laconically, after the door had closed.

"Oh, I hope not," said Mark, wishing to be polite.

Mr. Bligh's heir-apparent laughed rather disagreeably.

"No amount of hoping will keep the governor alive much longer," answered he; "and as far as that goes I shouldn't think he himself cared about living. What's the use of remaining alive when you've lost the use of your legs? You're only a burden to yourself and to others."

Archie cracked a walnut with unnecessary noise, threw the crackers down upon the table, and muttered something under his breath.

"I beg your pardon," said Morton, turning round upon him at once with a deferential smile; "did you make a remark?"

"Yes," answered Archie, "I made a remark. But perhaps I had better not repeat it."

Mark hastily threw himself into the breach with some question about the vintage of the claret they were drinking; but Morton, who may have been a little under the influence of that excellent wine, or may have been determined to exasperate his cousin—possibly both causes were at work—did not choose to be put to silence.

"I always think," said he, throwing himself back in his chair, and nursing his leg comfortably, "that the humbug of everyday life is the most gratuitous of the many miseries which we are in the habit of inflicting upon ourselves in this country. It serves absolutely no purpose, because nobody is deceived by it; it makes political speeches intolerably dull and leading articles simply unreadable. One must forgive lawyers and parsons and diplomatists, because it's their trade to say what they don't think, and their bread-and-butter depends upon it; but why the deuce shouldn't the rest of us acknowledge what we can't conceal? In my own humble way I endeavour to do so; and when a man is palpably dying I don't pretend to think that he will live for another twenty years."

Mark tried to give the discussion an academical turn,

and for a short space of time he was successful. He could not, however, do the whole of the talking himself, and so Morton soon found an opportunity of harking back to the original subject.

"Family affection," said he, "may be a very pretty thing where it exists; but where it doesn't exist, and where everybody knows that it doesn't, one merely behaves like a fool by making a show of it. When a man stands between me and a fortune, and when he happens to be afflicted with an incurable disease into the bargain, I confess that nothing seems to me more desirable than his removal to a happier sphere."

This was too much for Archie, who exclaimed:

"I believe you're the only man in England, Morton, who would say such a thing as that about his father in his father's house!"

"In all probability I am," agreed Morton, imperturbably; "that is just what I modestly venture to pride myself upon. You'll admit that I'm not the only man in England who holds such views; my peculiarity consists in my expressing them. And, mind you, I shouldn't for a moment hesitate to express them to the governor himself."

"Even you would hardly be such a blackguard as that!" cried Archie, hotly.

If Morton's object had been to make a short-tempered young man angry, he had attained it; but his own temper, though of a very different order, was not in the least under his control, and for all his love of plain language, it did not please him to hear himself called a blackguard. He shot a singularly malevolent glance across the table at his cousin as he said:

"All the same, you are quite as anxious as I am—a little more anxious, perhaps—to hear the governor's will read. You have done your best, in your rather clumsy way, to cut me out; but I shouldn't wonder if you were to meet with a disappointment after all. Toadying doesn't always pay."

"I can't submit to such a gross insult as that from any man," Archie declared, jumping up. "You must apologize for it at once, or either you or I must leave the house."

"A more appalling threat I never heard," chuckled Morton. "It will be painful to lose you; but I am afraid we must make up our minds to the loss, because I don't intend to go, and I certainly don't intend to apologize."

At this juncture Mark the pacificator thought it high time to intervene.

"Pardon me, gentlemen," said he, with a certain air of authority, "but you are both very much in the wrong. You have both said things which you do not really mean, and which I am sure you will see that you ought to retract."

Each of the disputants shook his head decisively, but Mark took no notice of that. He proceeded to point out that in a country like England, where the satisfaction which would be promptly demanded and granted elsewhere has been done away with by common consent, opprobrious epithets are clearly inadmissible. Then, with some adroitness, he observed that Morton could not actually believe in the very offensive charge which he had brought against his cousin, or he never would have put it into words. When one is apprehensive of being supplanted, one does not carefully put one's possible supplanter in the right and oneself in the wrong.

"Of course," he added, "I know nothing of Mr. Bligh's intentions and very little of his ethical standard; but I know that if I had a son who had forced a guest of mine to leave my house by insulting him, I should feel that I owed every reparation to my guest and the sharpest punishment I could inflict to my son."

By the time that he had finished his harangue he had made one of the men ashamed of himself and had frightened the other; and so the incident terminated

with a somewhat grudging exchange of apologies. The cousins, it need scarcely be said, were no better friends than they had been before; but they perceived the expediency of adjourning their quarrel. Morton went straight off to the smoking-room, while the other two joined Miss Skipwith and Cicely; and as the latter was still seated at the piano, Mark contrived to exchange a few words with her in private, under cover of the resonant chords which she continued to strike upon that instrument.

"If you are not careful there will be bloodshed in this house," said he, laughingly. "I have patched up a peace for to-night; but I do not answer for the future."

Cicely looked alarmed.

"Have Morton and Archie fallen out?" she asked, anxiously.

"Very much so. At home—in Russia, I mean—I could have done nothing; matters went too far. As it was I induced them to shake hands: *quittes a recommencer.*"

"They must not be allowed to quarrel!" exclaimed Cicely. "It would distress papa beyond everything; and there is really no reason why they should quarrel."

"As for that, of course I do not know; but I doubt whether they can be kept within bounds unless they are held back by strong hands. Could you, do you think, restrain your cousin? For your brother"—here Mark could not repress a look of contempt, which Cicely saw without resenting—"I really believe that I may venture to make myself responsible."

Now this was very kind of Mr. Chetwode, and Cicely felt proportionately grateful to him. She endeavoured to express her thanks, but had not much time for doing so, because Miss Skipwith and Archie, who had nothing to say to one another, very soon interrupted her. Mark, however, went away very well satisfied with his evening's work. He had somewhat strengthened his

hold over Morton, he had averted, what might have been a little dangerous, the elevation of Archie to the rank of an aggrieved person, and, best of all, he had established something like a secret understanding with Miss Bligh.

CHAPTER XVI.

ARCHIE'S TRIUMPH

WHILE Cicely was dressing on the following morning she made up her mind to give her cousin a lecture. Although she had been a good deal distressed at hearing that the dining-room had so nearly been made the scene of an unseemly brawl, Archie's foolish behaviour had at least had the effect of making her more comfortable in one respect, inasmuch as it had relieved her of the unwonted feeling of shyness in his presence with which she had been afflicted the night before. In her heart she rather liked him for attacking Morton, who, she was sure, had deserved it; still he must certainly be lectured.

So, as soon as breakfast was over, she followed him into the conservatory, whither he had betaken himself with a cigarette and a handful of letters, and drawing a wicker chair up to his side, seated herself upon it with an air of stern resolution.

"Archie," said she, "I am sorry to find that you can't keep your word—or your temper either!"

Archie raised a somewhat troubled countenance from his correspondence.

"Has that beast, Morton, been telling you anything?" he asked.

"No, 'that beast, Morton,' has kept his own counsel. It was Mr. Chetwode who told me that he had to drag you apart. Now, you know, Archie, you promised me that you wouldn't quarrel with Morton."

"I don't think I quite promised that, did I? I said I wouldn't quarrel with him if I could help it, and goodness knows I have tried hard enough to help it! But there must be limits to everybody's patience and meekness. You don't know what things that fellow says."

"Why will you never understand that it doesn't signify what he says?"

"I can't help feeling that it does signify a little to me when he tells me that I have done my very best to cut him out of his inheritance, and that I came down here on purpose to 'toady' Uncle Wilfrid."

"Did he say that?"

"Yes, 'toady' was the very word that he used. Ought I to have bowed and held my tongue?"

"Well—it isn't true, you see; and he only said it to enrage you, not because he believed it."

"So Chetwode seemed to think; but I don't know that one ought to be expected to submit to an insult just because it is a palpable lie. However, I had told him a few minutes before that he was a blackguard—which he is—so that I had to some extent put myself in the wrong, and we ended by burying the hatchet."

"I am afraid you buried it in some place where it can very easily be scratched up again. I don't feel that I have much right to scold you, Archie, because you certainly have been patient upon the whole, and you have had a good deal to put up with; but will you waive your rights and be patient a little longer, for papa's sake and mine?"

The young man's face brightened up wonderfully at this appeal.

"Of course, I will," he answered. "I'm not very good-tempered, I'm sorry to say, and sometimes I feel as if it would be a righteous deed to catch Morton by the throat and choke him. But I won't choke him, or even tell him what I think of him again. After all, if he becomes unbearable one can always go out of the room. Besides," he added, with a sigh and a change of

tone, "I sha'n't have many more chances of giving trouble, for I have just had orders to join at Aldershot on Friday, instead of a fortnight hence as I expected. It's a horrid bore."

"Will you think me very unkind if I say that I am glad?" asked Cicely.

"When Morton came you begged me not to leave you alone with him," Archie remarked, rather reproachfully.

"Yes, because I didn't think then that he would stay long; but now I don't see any prospect of getting rid of him, and though I quite believe that you will try your best to be forbearing, it isn't pleasant for you or me or anybody to go on as we have been doing lately. As it is, we'll manage to enjoy ourselves during your last few days. Now I must be off, or I shall get behindhand with all my morning's duties."

On her way through the hall she encountered Morton, to whom she thought it might be as well to impart the news of Archie's imminent departure, and who heard it with a satisfaction which he made no attempt to disguise. Morton, as it happened, had that morning received an urgent summons to London, where certain private affairs of his, which have nothing to do with this narrative, demanded his attention; but he had almost decided to let these affairs look after themselves as best they could, because he did not like the idea of leaving the enemy in possession of the field. Now, however, the case was altered. Archie might, it was true, offer himself to Cicely in the course of the next day or two; but that he could not, under any circumstances, have prevented him from doing, and it was needless to keep strict watch and ward over a man who would so soon be out of the way. When once he was gone, time would be upon the side of Cicely's affectionate brother and Mark Chetwode.

Morton therefore said:

"I find I shall have to run up to London myself this afternoon. Only for three days, though; so you needn't

shed tears. Let me see, this is Thursday, and I promised to dine with Chetwode on Monday. I think I could just manage to get through what I have to do by Monday evening, and I can drive straight to Upton Chetwode from the station. By the way, if you're going to the back regions you might tell somebody that I shall want the brougham at three o'clock sharp."

At luncheon, when the whole party met, Morton was in high good-humour and charmingly affable with everybody, actually offering to charge himself with any commissions that his aunt might desire to have executed in London. So pleased was he to notice that Cicely's spirits had been in no way depressed by the intelligence which had exhilarated his own, that he announced his intention of buying her a birthday present.

"I don't know when your birthday is, but as I probably forgot it last year and the year before, I have some arrears to make up."

Even for Archie he had a word or two of sour-sweet civility.

"Going back to your regiment, I hear. Well, I should think you will find Aldershot rather livelier than Abbotsport. Sorry we haven't been able to make your stay pleasanter; but our resources are limited, as you know. We'll try to do better if you look us up next winter. I suppose you'll hardly get leave again before then?"

With a truly heroic effort, Archie summoned up a distorted smile, which nearly upset Cicely's gravity, and grunted out "Thanks." To be spoken to as though he had been Morton's guest and to receive Morton's apologies for the dulness of the Priory was indeed hard to bear. However, the man was going, and he had three happy days to look forward to; at least, he hoped they would be happy, and in his anxiety to make them so it seemed to him wisest to put off to the last hour the momentous question upon which the happiness of his future life must depend.

But when Morton had been whirled away in the brougham, and when Cicely, of her own accord, invited him to walk with her as far as the gamekeeper's cottage, where she had a sick child to visit, he felt so much encouraged that he began to reconsider that decision. After all, she already knew that he loved her; would it not be better to tell her so plainly, instead of to keep hinting at it? To be at once accepted was more than he hoped for; he would be quite satisfied with an admission that he need not altogether despair. No sooner, therefore, had he and his companion reached the outskirts of the woods through which their path lay than he drew a long breath and plunged head first into a subject to which he had made several futile attempts to lead up.

"You said, this morning," he began, rather hoarsely, "that we would enjoy ourselves during my last few days here. There is only one thing that can make me enjoy myself now, and I needn't tell you what that is. Can you give it me, Cicely?"

The girl stood still, looking at him seriously and with a sort of kindly compassion.

"I don't know," she answered; "it depends upon how much you ask for."

"Oh, I only ask for very little," he declared, eagerly. "If you will but give me leave to hope that perhaps, some day, you may care for me a tenth part as much as I care for you, that shall be enough."

And gaining courage, now that he was fairly under way, he launched forth into fervent protestations which, like all words that come straight from the heart, had a certain effect of eloquence, but of which it would scarcely be fair to give a *verbatim* report.

When he paused, Cicely, who had resumed her walk, held out her hand to him and said, in a far humbler tone than was usual with her:

"Thank you, Archie; any woman might be proud to be loved by you, and I know very well how little I

deserve to be loved in that way; but I suppose one's deserts haven't much to say to such questions. Now I want to tell you the exact truth. I wish I loved you as you love me; but I don't."

"Of course you don't!" interrupted Archie. "I never dreamt of such a thing; I shall be more than content if you can care for me the least little bit."

"I care a great deal," Cicely answered; "but perhaps a great deal isn't enough. I don't think it is in my nature to fall desperately in love with anybody, and in many ways I seem to myself to be cut out for an old maid. But I know that nothing could make papa happier than to hear that we were engaged, and if we were married I think I could promise to be a good wife to you. It isn't as if I liked any one else better," she added, almost deprecatingly.

Archie had never anticipated being met in such a spirit as that. He was overjoyed, and could only stammer out incoherent phrases of delight and gratitude.

"But, Cicely," he broke off suddenly, "will you be happy with me? That is the question."

She shook her head.

"No," she answered, with a calmer insight into the future than he could as yet attain to, "that isn't the question. The question is whether you will be happy with me. What satisfies you now may not satisfy you always: you may think that if I am not in love with you at this moment I shall be before long—and then you may be disappointed."

Of course that was just what he did think, and most people would have told him that, under the circumstances, he was fully justified in so thinking. A man when he is in love is aware of the fact; but it is said—truly or untruly—that women are often unconscious of their own sentiments, and there is also an impression, so general altogthat it can hardly be ether devoid of foundation, to the effect that in nine cases out of ten a wife will end by loving her husband unless he treats her

badly. Archie, however, as was but natural, disclaimed such ambitious aspirations. He was willing and thankful to take all risks, he declared, and it was quite impossible that he could incur any disappointments.

Well, whatever the future might have in store for him he had not much to complain of in the present. Cicely had no idea of doing things by halves, and since Archie was to be her husband, it was her duty, she thought, to please him. Her efforts in that direction were quite successful and met with their reward; because in pleasing him she also to so emextent pleased herself. It is, no doubt, pleasant to be adored. Besides, she was really very fond of Archie.

The gamekeeper's little daughter was in luck that afternoon; for not only did she receive a visit from Miss Cicely (whom she loved, yet of whom she was considerably in awe), but after a time a very nice gentleman, who had been waiting about in the garden, stepped in, cracked some excellent jokes, and, on leaving, slipped nothing less than a golden sovereign into her small palm! Indeed it is well that that did not happen to be one of Cicely's days for going the round of Abbotsport, otherwise it is to be feared that night would have fallen upon some distressing scenes of intemperance.

When one is exceptionally happy it is only human that one should wish to give others a chance of being happy too, if they can manage it; but one can't expect everybody to drink one's health, and Miss Skipwith was very much disinclined to pay Archie that compliment on being requested to do so, the same evening, by her brother-in-law. Miss Skipwith could not but feel that Cicely was throwing herself away sadly; added to which the triumph of Archie was very bitter to her. When Mr. Bligh, in the exuberance of his satisfaction, proposed the above toast after dinner, the old lady raised her glass to her lips and set it down again with its contents undiminished. She became, however, a little

more reconciled to the engagement when she was subsequently informed that Archie's triumph was not quite of the kind that she had imagined, and that it was not in contemplation to make him inheritor of his uncle's estates. That was satisfactory in so far as it served to clear his character; but it was melancholy to think that Morton, not Cicely, was destined to reign at the Priory, and she could not resist saying as much to her informant, who answered:

"I am quite of your opinion, Susan; it is melancholy. Nevertheless it is inevitable; so we may as well put a bright face upon it."

When Mr. Bligh spoke in that tone of voice his sister-in-law always succumbed. He was a man who, as regarded trifles, preferred giving in to being worried, so that she not unfrequently found it to be her duty to worry him; but in matters of more importance he took his own way, and had a quiet and convincing fashion of letting those about him understand that he meant to do so. Miss Skipwith, therefore, endeavoured to put on a bright face, which feat was the more easy of accomplishment because Cicely's face was so bright. The main thing, after all, was that Cicely should be happy.

And happy Cicely certainly appeared to be. During the next three days she rode, walked and talked with Archie continually, and did not weary of his company. No doubt she saw him at his best, which she had not always done of late; but after making all deductions the fact remained that he was, as she had told him, a man of whose love any woman might be proud, and she did not regret her choice. Once or twice, to be sure, she thought with a pang of poor Bobby; but perhaps Bobby would not hear of her engagement before he had reached his tropical destination, and by that time his wound would probably have healed. The engagement, it was agreed, was not to be formally announced as yet, nor was any date fixed for the marriage.

"I can't leave papa with only Aunt Susan to attend

him," Cicely said; and Archie acquiesced. It was only too plain that the delay stipulated for was not likely to be a very long one.

Mr. Bligh, for his part, was in no hurry to get rid of his daughter, and thought it as well that the young man should return to duty for a time. He wished him, however, to send in his papers before his marriage, and this Archie expressed his willingness to do. Indeed, when the day came for his departure he felt very much inclined to send them in forthwith.

"I beg you will do no such thing!" said Cicely, laughing. "Have you forgotten that Morton comes back to-night?"

"I'm not afraid of him," answered Archie.

"Perhaps not; but I am. At least I should be in perpetual terror of your devouring one another if you were both living in the house. No, I should prefer your remaining at Aldershot until he has accustomed his mind to the idea that you will be his brother-in-law some day. It's a merciful thing that you will have left before he arrives."

"I suppose I had better go up by the three-thirty train," observed Archie, ruefully.

"That depends upon whether you want to be at Aldershot this evening or not. If not, you might stay until after dinner; because Morton is going to dine at Upton Chetwode and intends to dress there, so that there is not much fear of his appearance here before the coast is clear!"

Archie jumped at this reprieve as eagerly as if he had been a school-boy on the last day of the holidays. He was, in truth, very like a school-boy in more ways than one, and that perhaps was what had won him the place which he held in Cicely's heart; for she always got on best with those whom she could patronize a little. His talk, when he was happy and at his ease, was of that artlessly selfish kind which no one, surely, can help enjoying. He would chatter away by the hour

about his brother officers and the exceedingly humorous practical jokes which they were wont to play upon one another, and about polo and tent-pegging and pig-sticking and other enlivenments of Indian military life, while Cicely encouraged him by her questions. Perhaps one reason why she never wearied of hearing him dilate upon these themes was that the discussion of them prevented him from being too affectionate.

"Would there be any harm," he asked her, "in telling the fellows that I am engaged to be married? It's so difficult to keep a thing of that sort to oneself!"

"By all means tell them, if you like," answered Cicely, laughing; "there is no occasion to make a secret of it. Only I hope you won't bore them by dwelling too much upon the perfections of your betrothed."

"Oh, *they* won't mind," Archie declared, reassuringly. "Especially if they know that I shall leave the regiment when I marry. Of course we don't care about having many married men."

"And aren't you afraid that you will miss your friends, and polo, and all the rest of it, when you settle down to a humdrum country life?"

He made the reply which might have been anticipated. Life with her on a desert island would be a thousand times better than life anywhere without her; but life in the neighbourhood of Abbotsport would be simply the realization of his wildest dreams.

"And even if we did find it slow—which is impossible—we could have people down to stay with us. One can always get heaps of men to come, by offering them a little shooting or hunting."

"Well, let us hope so," said Cicely. "Papa thinks Upton Chetwode would do for us. We could certainly get a lease of the place, and perhaps Mr. Chetwode might be persuaded to sell. Papa means to sound him upon the subject, and if he is successful he says he will make us a wedding present of it. It's a dear

old house; it only wants a little outlay to be made charming."

This conversation took place during the last few minutes of Archie's stay at the Priory. It was a fine moonlight night, and as the dog-cart had come round rather early, he had sent the groom on with his luggage, saying that he would walk to the station by the short cut across the fields. Cicely had accompanied him to the end of the garden, and they were now standing beside a little iron gate which divided it from the park.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the young fellow, "how awfully good Uncle Wilfrid is! It seems to me that I am just about the luckiest beggar in the whole world!"

"If you think so," Cicely answered, smiling, "that is the same thing as being so, I suppose."

Then she cut short his *adieux*, over which he was inclined to linger, telling him that he would have to put his best leg foremost if he didn't want to miss the train. She watched his tall, lithe figure as he strode across the grass in the moonlight, and waved her hand to him when he turned to signal a last farewell. She said to herself that she certainly loved him. What a pity that there should be a difference—possibly rather a wide difference—between loving and being in love!

CHAPTER XVII.

MORTON SCANDALIZES HIS HOST

It was well for Morton Bligh's peace of mind, and well also for the comfort of those with whom he was brought into contact in London, that he was ignorant of the terrible things which had been taking place at the Priory during his absence. He felt little or no anxiety upon the point; being persuaded, for one thing, that

Mark Chetwode had produced an impression upon his sister, and, for another, that Archie had not utilized his opportunities as he might have done.

"To get on the blind side of the governor," soliloquized Morton, as he sat in the train which was bearing him southwards, "one must affect a good deal of bluntness; and that young fool has overdone the modest, diffident business, I suspect. Anyhow, if Cicely refuses him, he's out of it; the governor won't disinherit both his children, that's certain."

And very agreeable it was to Morton to reflect that it would now no longer be necessary for him to mount guard so vigilantly at the Priory. If there was one thing more abhorrent to him than another it was rusticity; and he would have cared little enough about his birthright if drawing the revenues arising from the Bligh estates had implied residence upon the spot. He was never really comfortable out of London, where, although, as has been said, a good many people declined to have anything to do with him, he had still a sufficiency of friends, who may have been less particular or may have thought that his moral character concerned them less than his ability to provide them with capital dinners.

"I shall keep coming and going; that will be the best plan," he mused. "Unless I'm greatly mistaken, Chetwode has swallowed the bait; he can't want much spurring on or backing up. Still one ought to be upon the spot from time to time, if only for the sake of appearances. It's a bore, but it's better than having to spend weeks at a stretch in that God-forsaken hole; and I daresay it won't last long. Those good folks may console themselves with the thought that they'll see no more of me than I can help after my revered predecessor has been laid to rest in the family vault. Once let me get possession, and they may all go to the deuce together for anything that I shall care. Cicely will have my full consent to marry whom she pleases then, and if

she chooses Archie in preference to Chetwode I shall be most happy to escort her to church and give her away. I rejoice in promoting the welfare of my fellow-creatures, so long as it doesn't interfere with my own."

Revolving these and other sentiments, not less handsome and liberal, in his mind, Morton reached the end of his journey homewards in very good humour. In obedience to his instructions, a carriage had been sent from the Priory to meet him, and he was at once driven to Upton Chetwode, where he was received by Mark's French valet. That urbane personage, apologizing for his master, who had not yet come in, conducted Morton to one of the spacious, dismal bedrooms, unpacked his dress-clothes for him, and retired with the remark that dinner would be served in half an hour precisely.

"The fellow speaks as if one of the cook's exquisite *plats* might be spoilt by being kept waiting," thought Morton, with some amusement. "I don't suppose there'll be much to spoil. What a nuisance it must be to be as badly off as Chetwode! However, it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good, and his poverty makes him handy just at present. He ought to be uncommonly grateful to me for giving him such a chance of making a first-rate alliance."

But when he went downstairs to the drawing-room, where his host was awaiting him, he could detect no signs of gratitude nor even of pleasure upon that gentleman's face. Mark, as he held out his hand, said, "I am glad to see you," but he did not look glad; he looked bored and worried, and responded somewhat chillingly to the other's boisterous cordiality.

Almost the first thing that Morton said was:

"Well, thank goodness, we've seen the last of our friend Archie for some time to come. I suppose you've heard that he has gone back to his regiment?"

Mark looked at the speaker with a faint ironical smile.

"Yes," he answered. "I heard that your cousin was to leave to-day. That is good news, isn't it?"

"Well, I consider it so," answered Morton. "And," he added with a knowing glance, "I should think you would too."

But Mark did not choose to understand this delicate allusion. He raised his eyebrows slightly and said:

"Oh, your cousin did not interfere with me in any way. I seldom met him, and had not your reasons for disliking him."

Morton, who was a good deal afraid of the man whom he hoped to make his accomplice, did not venture to pursue the subject farther, and presently they adjourned to the dining-room, where, to the great surprise of the guest, a very cleverly cooked little dinner was set before them. After a time Morton could no longer refrain from commenting upon the phenomenon.

"Where the deuce did you get your cook from, Chetwode? Not from Abbotsport, or anywhere near it, I'll be bound."

"Well, no," answered Mark. "My cook—or at least the person who has been so kind as to cook for us to-night—hails from Paris. For the credit of the house he doesn't mind exercising his skill when I have a guest; but he won't cook for me, and when I am alone I am at the mercy of an aged native who can just manage a mutton-chop and no more. Fortunately, I don't care much what I eat or drink."

Morton, who cared a very great deal, thought it still more fortunate that the establishment included an intermittent culinary artist. He did full justice to each dish in turn, and also thoroughly appreciated the wine, which, for many years past, had been maturing in a locked-up cellar; so that by the time he had been provided with black coffee and a cigarette he saw the world and all that therein is through a beautiful rose-coloured haze. And now it was that Mark, who during dinner had spoken little, had drunk less, and had scarcely eaten at all, judged it appropriate to make a

communication which motives of hospitality and charity had thus far induced him to withhold.

"I am afraid, my dear Bligh," said he, "that I am going to tell you something which will not exactly delight you. From all that you have been saying, I presume that you have not yet heard the news of your sister's engagement to your cousin."

"What!" exclaimed Morton, starting so violently that he spilt the half of his coffee. "Oh, I see—you're chaffing. You wouldn't take it quite so coolly as that if it were true."

"Why should I not take it coolly?" asked Mark. "At all events, it is perfectly true."

"I don't believe it!" Morton declared. "If you aren't humbugging me, somebody has been humbugging you."

"Possibly; but I think not. My informant was Mrs. Lowndes, whom I met this afternoon, and who had received her information from Miss Skipwith. According to Miss Skipwith, the engagement is not to be publicly announced just yet, but the family have no wish to keep it secret from their friends. Mr. Bligh is said to be very much pleased about it."

That seemed terribly circumstantial. Morton's incredulity gave place to a sudden gust of fury, and he burst forth into language respecting his father which cannot be reported here.

"Pleased!" he exclaimed. "I should rather think he would be pleased! Why, he has been moving heaven and earth to bring about this accursed marriage! It sha'n't take place though. I'll stop it—we must stop it! Dash it all, man, why do you sit grinning there, as if it were a good joke! Don't you understand that *everything* depends upon our putting a stop to this at once?"

Mark surveyed his angry questioner with unconcealed contempt and disgust.

"I quite understand," he answered, coldly, "that your

prospect of becoming your father's heir depends in all probability upon your power to break off a match which he seems to have arranged. Cursing, however, will hardly help you. Might I request you, as a personal favour, not to do it any more? It may be prejudice on my part, but it is extremely disagreeable to me to hear a man cursing his father—especially when he uses such very coarse forms of malediction."

"My father hates me, and I hate him," returned Morton, sullenly; "we have different ways of expressing our hatred, that's all. I'm sorry I shocked your sense of propriety; but you must allow that I have had great provocation. It's enough to put any man's back up to have such a dirty trick played upon him."

"Oh, it's provoking for you, no doubt."

"And not altogether pleasant for you either, I imagine. Come, Chetwode, I think you and I have understood one another pretty well, though we haven't put our thoughts into plain English before. You know why my father wants to marry Cicely to his nephew. He would a great deal rather leave the place to her than to me, but he doesn't like to leave it to anybody but a Bligh. Consequently he had to provide her with a husband of that name. Of course, in self-defence, I had to try and find her a husband with some other name——"

"And you did me the great honour to select me. I was duly sensible of it."

"I don't know why you should take up that tone, Chetwode. My feeling to you has always been a most friendly one, I'm sure. I thought that if Cicely married you she would marry a gentleman and a good fellow; and the advantage wouldn't have been all on one side, for, as I believe I told you, she will come into at least fifty thousand pounds at her father's death. Moreover, it appeared to me that you were very willing to lend yourself to the plan."

"That may be."

"And if I were not afraid of offending you, I would make so bold as to say that you were becoming rather—er—fond of my sister, apart from any consideration of money."

"You do not offend me by saying so."

"Well, then, my dear fellow, surely you are not going to be such a—I mean, you surely won't give up the game before it is lost! You're altogether mistaken if you imagine she has lost her heart to that long-legged donkey. She has been talked into this, and she can be talked out of it again. Not by me, I admit, because she shares the family affection for me; but if you can't accomplish that much you're not the man I take you for. Archie hasn't got an extension of leave, I suppose, has he?"

"No; he was to return to his regiment to-day, I understood."

"The field is clear, then: all that you have to do is to cut him out with Cicely, which, I should say, is well within your capacity. Meanwhile, I'll do what I can with the governor. When all's said and done, he has a conscience, or flatters himself that he has. And then, I daresay, by raking about a little, I might be able to furnish him with an awkward story or two about his precious nephew. A man doesn't knock about a garrison town long without getting into a scrape of *some* sort or kind, you may be sure."

Perhaps it was only this last phrase which saved Mark from yielding to the voice of the tempter and entering into a discreditable compact. During the first part of Morton's speech his eyes had brightened; after which he had turned them away and gazed pensively at his neat little shoes. But if his code of honour was hardly that of an ordinary English gentleman, it was not wide enough to admit association with such a pitiable sneak as Morton Bligh. Therefore he only said:

"You are very flattering, but I am afraid you must not count on my assistance."

"Why not?" asked Morton, sharply.

"For various reasons, with which I won't trouble you; because I should despair of making you understand them."

"The long and short of it is, then, that you mean to leave me in the lurch."

"If you like to call it so."

"Hum! Well, you're a nice sort of friend, I must say!"

For the first time that evening Mark laughed outright.

"You honour me very much when you describe me as your friend," said he, "and I would not for the world appear ungracious or ungrateful. Still I can't resist asking you whether you really were under the impression that I should pay my addresses to your sister for love of you?"

Morton made no reply. A liqueur decanter of cognac had been brought in with the coffee, and to this he had been devoting himself assiduously during the last few minutes. That was a kind of indulgence which he could never permit himself with impunity, so that by this time his ideas had lost all distinctness of outline. One thing only was quite clear to him: by hook or by crook, his sister must be prevented from marrying Archie.

"I'll clear that fellow out of my path somehow," he declared resolutely, after his host had been waiting a long time for him to speak.

"I am sure it would be wise on your part to do so," answered Mark, who began to find the man rather amusing, and had got over a strong desire to kick him out of the house; "the only question is how are you to do it? In this over-civilized country one can't assassinate one's enemies, or even get them assassinated."

But Morton was very bold, and said:

"If I had him here now he shouldn't leave this

room alive, I can tell you!" Whereat Mark laughed again.

For a time it was a little diverting to listen to the vapourings of this half-tipsy fool; but when these degenerated into mere impotent blasphemy Mark grew disgusted once more, and out of sheer weariness began to take Archie's part.

"I really don't see why you should feel so much animosity against him," he said at length. "He appears to me to be a very commonplace, honest sort of a young man, and quite genuinely in love with his cousin."

"Oh, you think so, do you?" snarled Morton. "That's all you know about him. Commonplace he may be, but I'll be shot if he is honest! Anybody, except the governor, who didn't choose to see, would have seen what his game was all along. Why, even old Aunt Susan saw it! I'm not beat yet, though, I can tell him. He shall live to regret having stolen a march upon me!"

And so forth, and so forth, for the best part of another quarter of an hour. Morton showed no disposition to move, nor was it possible to get him to talk about anything save the one all-important subject. The longest lane, however, has a turning, and when the liqueur decanter had been drained to its last drop, Morton rose, steadying himself by the table, and said he supposed it was about time to order the brougham.

Mark rang the bell with alacrity, and then was revealed the unpleasant circumstance that no brougham was forthcoming. Perhaps the disused stables were not fit for horses to be put up in; perhaps the coachman, having received no orders to wait, may have taken it for granted that Morton proposed to sleep where he dined: or, perhaps (for like the rest of the servants at the Priory he had no love for his future master), he may not have been unwilling to play a trick upon that gentleman. In any case he had driven straight home, and it was now too late to think of sending to Abbots-

port for a fly. What was to be done? Mark, of course, could do no less than offer his guest a bed; but he was relieved when the latter, after considering for a while and heaping many injurious epithets upon the coachman, decided that he would walk home.

"Well, it's a beautiful night," said Mark.

It was a beautiful night, and the moonlight made everything so clear that even a man in Morton's condition could see his way as well as if it had been noonday. Whether, even if it had been noonday, it would have been quite safe to let him go home alone was another question; but Mark was so thoroughly sick of him that he felt quite unable to offer his services as an escort. He stood on the steps and watched the departure of the belated reveller, who really went wonderfully straight, considering all things. Every now and then he stopped and pawed the air in the attempt to ascend an imaginary hill, and once or twice he took great pains to circumnavigate some non-existent obstacle; but he kept on moving in the right direction, and there seemed to be a very fair chance of his reaching his destination eventually.

"And if he tumbles into a ditch and lies there till he dies, nobody will be one penny the worse," reflected Mark. "That, however, will not happen. He is far too obnoxious a member of society to come to an untimely end."

Mark turned away from the door and strolled across the terrace on the south side of the house, where there was a stone balustrade, overgrown with ivy and lichen. Upon this he dropped his elbows, and so stood for a long time, lost in gloomy meditation. The intelligence which inquisitive little Mrs. Lowndes had taken such pleasure in imparting to him had fallen upon him like a thunderbolt from a clear sky. The idea of reconstructing his fallen fortunes by means of a marriage with Cicely Bligh was one which at first he had contemplated with little more than languid acquiescence, but

latterly, as we know, his feelings had undergone a change; and then, too, there is all the difference in the world between a desirable thing which you may have for the asking and a thing which you can't possibly have, however much you may desire it. He had, it is true, soon discovered that the siege and capture of Cicely's heart would be a task demanding some skill, labour and patience, but he had looked forward with a good deal of confidence to the result of his operations. He had made the mistake of despising Archie; he had felt convinced that the young man's chance was not worth considering, and now he was bitterly disappointed. And the worst of it was that it was not the loss of her fortune that disappointed him. He tried to persuade himself that it was, and he was in a measure successful, because the prospect of lingering on at Upton Chetwode in extreme poverty was appalling enough, but in the end he had to face the truth, which was anything but welcome to him.

"I love her," he muttered, "and a pretty fool I am for my pains! It is rather late in the day for me to be making myself miserable because a little girl prefers a subaltern with a pair of spurs and a long sword to a middle-aged civilian. Don't little girls always prefer subalterns to middle-aged civilians? And are their preferences a matter of any importance? Yet—how can one help oneself? It is a malady like other human maladies, and one gets over it in time, as one gets over the others, unless one happens to die of them. But it hurts while it lasts."

He sighed and turned back into the house, where one of Madame Souravieff's bulky letters was lying on his table unopened. He smiled ironically as his eye fell on it, remembering that he had once been deeply in love with Madame Souravieff.

"Come," he said to himself, "there are compensations in every lot; now at least I have escaped the risk of being poisoned or stabbed."

CHAPTER XVIII.

FORTUNA SÆVO LÆTA NEGOTIO

A PECULIAR feature of English railway management, which everybody must have noticed, is that the train is invariably behind its time when one turns up at the station with five minutes to spare, and just as invariably punctual if, by some unusual mischance, one happens to be a minute or two late. Archie, perhaps, was not yet sufficiently advanced in life to have learnt that this is a rule without an exception: at all events, he was not much alarmed when, on consulting his watch, he found he had run things rather fine. The express was due at Abbotsport Road at 10.30; it was now twenty-eight minutes past ten, and he was still nearly a quarter of a mile from the station. However, he set out at a slinging trot, and had the satisfaction of arriving breathless upon the platform just as the tail lamp of the express was disappearing.

"Dear me, sir, you was very nearly in time," said the porter, commiseratingly. "I've got your luggage labelled, but I didn't like to put it in—not afore I see you, sir."

"What on earth am I to do?" ejaculated Archie. "I'm bound to be at Aldershot to-morrow morning."

"Oh, that'll be all right, sir; there's the 12.15 as'll get you up plenty o' time, though 'tis a slow train."

Well, this was better than having to order a special; still it was a very great nuisance, and the prospect of waiting an hour and three-quarters on a deserted platform was not cheerful. Archie, however, was in so happy a mood that night that he was prepared to accept all ordinary annoyances philosophically, and he did not spend much time in grumbling. Having lighted a cigar, he tried walking up and down the

platform for a few minutes; but finding that intolerable, he left the precincts of the station and sauntered across the fields in a seaward direction, congratulating himself upon the mildness and beauty of the night. After all, he had so much to think about that the time did not seem very long. It is a pathetic testimony to the predominant sadness of life that no one ever doubts the reality of his misfortunes, whereas the effect of unexpected happiness is so frequently to shake the happy mortal's conviction of his own identity. Archie was still in that blissful state of semi-scepticism. A week ago he would have only been too thankful for a word of encouragement from Cicely; that she would accept him at the first time of asking he had never for a moment expected. And now he was going to be married to her! Going to be married very soon, too, perhaps: for although dates had not yet been mentioned, it was evident Mr. Bligh was not in favour of indefinite delay, and that if a home could be found for his daughter near him, he would be willing to let her quit the shelter of his roof. Archie kept repeating to himself that these things could not be, for the pleasure of assuring himself that they were. He did not notice particularly in what direction he was walking, but simply followed his nose, which happened to point due south, and so, after a time, he came perforce to a standstill; for now he had reached the edge of the cliffs, and was looking down upon a little shingly bay, where the waves broke with a soft swish and a rattle of loose pebbles far beneath him. On his right hand a portion of Abbotsport was distinguishable, and on his left was a belt of trees, towards which the footpath upon which he was standing led.

Now this footpath afforded the most direct means of communication between the Priory and Upton Chetwode, and, as ill luck would have it, it was along this footpath that Morton Bligh was even then wending his homeward way. Archie was disturbed in the midst of a

pleasing vision by the sound of uncertain footsteps, and, turning his head to see who it was coming, recognized his cousin, who at the same moment recognized him. Both men stood still and stared. It was no longer possible to avoid a meeting which one of them, at any rate, would gladly have escaped; but as neither of them had been in the least prepared for it, a few instants of silence and hesitation ensued. Morton spoke first.

"What the devil are you doing here?" he asked, in a thick voice.

"Nothing unlawful, I assure you," answered Archie, laughing. "I've managed to miss my train, that's all; so I've got to wander about until past midnight."

Morton paid no heed to this explanation, possibly did not even hear it. He was trembling with rage and excitement, and the torrent of incoherent abuse which he began to pour forth was barely intelligible; but it was evident that he had heard of his sister's engagement, and was even more angry about it than might have been anticipated.

Archie thought it best to let him rave on. He was determined to keep his temper, and, indeed, did not feel at all tempted to lose it. But when Morton proceeded from objurgations to threats, and actually squared up to him in an absurd caricature of a fighting attitude, he said:

"For Heaven's sake don't make such an ass of yourself! Go home and go to bed, like a reasonable being. There wouldn't be the slightest use in my discussing matters with you now, but when you know all about it to-morrow, you will see that you haven't much cause for complaint. At least, I expect so," added Archie, as a saving clause; for it occurred to him that his uncle might not, perhaps, intend to make the provisions of his will known to his heir-apparent.

"I don't know what you expect, but I know what you'll get—and that's a jolly good thrashing!" called out Morton.

Considering the relative strength of the two men, this menace was sufficiently ridiculous; but Morton, nevertheless, attempted to carry it into effect, so that Archie was compelled in self-defence to reduce him to comparative helplessness by getting behind him and throwing his arms up. In this position the captive kicked out vigorously and the captor's shins suffered a little; but the scuffle could have but one termination.

"I won't hit you again if you'll let me go," gasped out Morton at length.

"Thank you very much," answered Archie, laughing and releasing him. "Now, if you'll take my advice you'll get home as quickly as you can, and tell them to bring you some seltzer with a dash of brandy in it the first thing in the morning."

Morton turned sullenly away, making no reply. The struggle had partially sobered him, but it had not made him any steadier on his legs, and Archie, who was at first amused by his divagations, began presently to think that these might prove no laughing matter if he persisted in such dangerous proximity to a precipice. He had not the time, and he certainly had not the inclination, to see his cousin home, but he felt bound in common humanity to conduct him a short distance inland. Accordingly, he strode after him and took him by the arm, saying:

"I'll walk a bit of the way with you."

"I don't want your company," returned Morton, roughly.

"If it comes to that, I am not very anxious for yours; but you had better have somebody to look after you for the next two or three hundred yards. You're awfully drunk, you know, and if you were to slip over the edge anywhere hereabouts you would never move again."

He was quite prepared for another torrent of strong language, but, to his surprise, Morton, whose manner had undergone a sudden and complete change, leant

heavily upon his arm and thanked him in a very humble tone of voice for his assistance.

"Devilish kind of you, I'm sure, after the way I treated you just now. You're a good fellow, Archie —upon my word you are! Let's be friends!"

"Oh, all right, anything you like," replied Archie, somewhat impatiently. "Come on!" He only wanted to get rid of the wretched creature, and did not take this abrupt tendering of the olive-branch seriously.

"Yes, but you must let me beg your pardon for what I said to you," persisted Morton, as he staggered along. "Quite unjustifiable, I admit. But you'll overlook it, won't you? You'll try to forget it?"

"Certainly; but don't shove me over the cliff in the meantime, please," answered Archie; for his companion kept on lurching against him, and there was not much room to spare.

Now that he was provided with a prop to lean upon, Morton seemed to have lost all control over his movements, nor was it easy to keep him away from the perilous verge towards which he perversely gravitated at every step.

"I'll tell you what it is," exclaimed Archie, at length; "if you go on like this you'll have me down presently; and if I go down you'll go too. Can you understand that much?"

Had there not happened to be on that spot a jutting ledge upon the face of the cliff, those would beyond all doubt have been Archie Bligh's last words on earth; for hardly were they out of his mouth when Morton, wrenching himself away with a sudden jerk, gave him a push which threw him completely off his balance. For one horrible, sickening instant he gave himself up for lost; the next he was hanging over the abyss, one knee supported by the narrow shelf of chalk which had arrested his fall, while his fingers clutched convulsively at the scanty herbage, by means of which he strove in vain to haul himself up.

Morton, whose pale face, illumined by the moonlight, had an expression of triumphant malignity, stamped upon his hands as he struggled. If the would-be murderer had had nails in his boots he might possibly have achieved his purpose; but he was a small, light man, and he was wearing thin evening shoes. All he could do—and this he did during several interminable seconds—was to prevent his victim from obtaining any hold sufficient to support the weight of over twelve stone. Archie felt that he was in deadly peril; he did not know how far the projection upon which his knee was resting could be trusted, and he feared that his nerve was beginning to fail. At last, with a despairing effort, he seized his assailant's leg, and, throwing his body forward, just—and only just—managed to fall, gasping and panting, upon his face on the firm land.

The instinct of self-preservation impelled him at once to crawl away from the brink, over which his feet were still hanging, and while he was doing so a loud crashing sound rose to his ears from the beach below. That was really all that he knew about it. Even when he sat up, exhausted and bewildered, and could see no sign of Morton, he did not at once realize that in saving his own life he had taken that of his cousin. Afterwards he remembered in a confused sort of way that Morton had been dragged to the ground, and he thought, but was not sure, that he remembered hearing the unfortunate man cry out; but for the moment he was simply dazed and unable to collect his senses. It was only by degrees that the awful truth dawned upon him, bringing out a cold sweat upon his forehead and making him shiver from head to foot. Morton was killed—of that there could not be the slightest doubt, for the cliff over which he had fallen was at least four hundred feet in height—and Archie may be forgiven if in the presence of such a catastrophe his first thought was for himself, and not for the man who had attempted to murder him.

For Morton, indeed, nothing could be done; but the survivor surely had need to keep his wits about him, and to take what action might seem best to secure himself against the risk of a horrible accusation. Poor Archie had not all his wits about him, but he had sense enough to be aware that if he rushed straight off to the Priory, gave the alarm and related the whole truth, he would inevitably live out the rest of his life under a certain cloud of suspicion which nothing could remove. Cicely would believe his story; so would his uncle; so, perhaps, but not certainly, would most of his friends and neighbours. But some persons there would undoubtedly be who would shake their heads and purse up their lips. That his cousin and he had been upon bad terms was notorious; it would soon be seen how greatly his worldly prospects were improved by Morton's removal; and the circumstance of his having missed his train and walked back to a place where Morton was likely to be encountered would scarcely escape comment. The more Archie thought of it—and he had not much time for thought—the more he shrank from the only straightforward course, and the more he felt tempted to seek safety in flight.

For flight would mean safety, absolute and complete. No suggestion of foul play would be put forward, because Mark Chetwode must have known that Morton had left his house in a state of intoxication, and that a tipsy man should miss his footing and roll over a cliff was in no way surprising. As for himself, it would hardly be supposed that he had wandered so far away from the station; nor in truth would there be any ground for such a supposition. All he had to do was to hurry back, to report himself at Aldershot in due course, to be as much shocked as other people when the news of the accident reached him, and to treat the events of the last half-hour as though they had never occurred. Was he not morally justified in adopting

that plan? Was he not guiltless of his cousins death?

"He tried his best to kill me," muttered Archie, "and I should have had a right to try and kill him in self-defence. But I didn't try; it was all his own doing, not mine."

Well, he had to make up his mind, for there were not many minutes to spare, and if he missed the train a second time, his fate must necessarily be decided for him. It seems hard to condemn a man placed, through no fault of his own, in so cruel a dilemma, for choosing to make himself safe. Yet he was wrong, and he lived to acknowledge it. Setting the moral aspect of the question aside, it would have been better for him to confess the truth and take all the consequences that might result, than to carry about with him to his grave a secret which he could never dare to impart to any other human being. But at the time he naturally did not realize what the burden of that secret must be. He was horror-struck, but not remorseful (having no cause for remorse), and as he hastened along the track, which he had lately traversed under such different conditions of feeling, his longing for escape found expression in the words which he kept repeating over and over:

"Nobody will know! Nobody will know!"

CHAPTER XIX.

"DEATH BY MISADVENTURE"

EARLY in the morning, Mrs. Allspice, the housekeeper at the Priory, had got through her daily task of rousing up heavy-headed housemaids, and was seated in her sanctum adding up accounts, when a tap on the window-pane made her jump.

"Drat the man!" she exclaimed irritably, when she recognized the face of old Coppard; "why can't he go to the back door, instead of stealing upon a body that way, like a thief in the night?" And, throwing open the window, she proceeded to administer the rating which the case appeared to call for.

"You'll excuse me, mum," said Coppard, in his deep, hoarse voice, "but I'm the bearer of bad noos, which had best be for your private hear. As I come along I thinks to myself, 'Mrs. Hallspice, she's a sensible 'oman with a powerful gift of self-control; I'll tell what must be told to Mrs. Hallspice, and keep out of the way o' them silly gals, as 'ud go screeching all over the place and breakin' things violent 'stead of easy, like they should be broke.'"

Notwithstanding the self-control with which she was credited, Mrs. Allspice pressed her hand to her heart and gasped.

"Mercy upon me!" she ejaculated. "Don't tell me it's Mr. Archie!"

Coppard shook his head but did not relax the solemnity of his expression.

"To the best o' my knowledge and belief, mum, there ain't nothin' amiss with the young gentleman as you speak of," he replied.

"The Lord be praised for that! Step in through the window, then, if the rheumatics 'll let you. You're right about those girls; they're just as inquisitive as they're flighty, and a stronger thing than that I couldn't say."

Coppard having hoisted himself into the room with rather more groaning and wheezing than was absolutely necessary (for he felt that he had a claim on Mrs. Allspice's famous cherry brandy, and he wanted to show her how much he needed it), proceeded to unfold his tale. As this was a very long business indeed, and was adorned by numerous picturesque digressions, it may perhaps be summarized with advantage. The

upshot of it was that, having pulled round to the Pebble Cove soon after daybreak to pick up his crab-pots, he had seen the body of a man lying on the beach, and that, after landing and making a closer inspection, he had discovered, to his horror, that this unfortunate was no other than Mr. Morton Bligh, stone dead, "and so knocked about and smashed as I won't distress your feelings by describing of it, mum." He had at once hastened to Abbotsport and had assembled a party, with whose help he had removed the corpse to the Seven Stars—"where it now lays, mum. For I didn't venture not for to let 'em carry it up to the Priory, mum, till I got instructions. I couldn't feel as it ought to be done, mum—which I daresay you'll understand me."

Mrs. Allspice commended Coppard and gave him the cherry brandy which his soul loved. She was, of course, very much shocked, and said so a great many times; but she was more impressed by the awful suddenness with which the sinner had been "called to his account," than afflicted by his demise. As to the manner in which the accident had come about she felt little doubt. Mr. Morton had been expected home on the previous evening, but his non-appearance had caused no alarm, because it was known that he was dining at Upton Chetwode, and, as he had his portmanteau with him, it was supposed that he intended sleeping there. Evidently, if he had had such an intention, he must have abandoned it and started to walk home—possibly under circumstances which rendered walking in the neighbourhood of a cliff imprudent. Mrs. Allspice had reason to be aware that the circumstances alluded to not unfrequently presented themselves in Mr. Morton's case after dinner. But now the question was, who was to break the news to the Squire? And to such a question there could, in that house, be only one answer. It was, as Coppard said, "crool 'ard" upon Miss Cicely, but then she had courage enough for anything; "and besides——" added Mrs. Allspice, caressing her double

chin meditatively with her finger and thumb, and leaving her sentence unfinished.

The worthy housekeeper probably meant that it would be impossible for Miss Cicely to grieve very deeply over the death of such a brother, but did not like to say so. Presently she sighed and went up to Cicely's bedroom, after telling old Coppard to stay where he was, and left the cherry brandy on the table —a thing which she never would have done if her mental balance had not been disturbed. When she returned at the end of a quarter of an hour she saw at once how her confidence had been abused, and placed a mental punishment mark against the delinquent's name; but the present occasion not being an appropriate one for letting him know what she thought of him, she contented herself with giving him a stern look, which he did not seem to comprehend, and telling him to go round to the front door, where he would find Miss Cicely, who wished to see him.

Cicely was waiting on the lawn when Coppard emerged from the stable-yard, and she at once moved further away from the house, beckoning to him to follow her.

"I don't want the servants to know that you are here," she said, as he approached; "they would be sure to guess that something was wrong, and I haven't had time to consider yet how papa is to be told. I am afraid it might do him a great deal of harm if he heard it without any preparation, or even if he suspected that a misfortune had happened and didn't know what it was. In whatever way he may learn it, it is certain to make him ill."

Her cheeks were very white, but her voice was steady and her manner composed. Possibly she might have displayed more emotion if she had only had her own feelings to think of; but as it was there was room for nothing in her mind but dread of the effect of a sudden shock upon her father in his present frail

condition. She made Coppard repeat all that she had already heard from the housekeeper, but while she seemed to be listening to the details of his prolix narrative she was in reality debating half a dozen ways of softening a blow which could not be softened, and finding objections to them all.

Coppard was still dilating upon the forethought and presence of mind which he had exhibited throughout this melancholy affair when the tall figure of Mr. Lowndes was seen hurrying up the avenue. Cicely advanced to meet him, glad to have found somebody with whom she could take counsel; for although it was not her habit to ask advice or accept it, she sometimes allowed herself to be guided by the Rector, whose sound common sense she appreciated.

"You have heard?" she said, interrogatively.

Mr. Lowndes made a sign of assent.

"I came up at once to see whether I could be of any use. Has your father been told?"

"Not yet; and I don't know how it is to be done. Even if he were quite well he would feel it a great deal more than—than——"

"Well, yes; I am afraid he would," agreed the Rector, who understood what she did not say.

"And he is not as strong as he was a month ago," continued Cicely, the tears suddenly coming into her eyes. "I have not been able to make up my mind to go to him; but I must not put it off any longer. Will you come with me?"

"Wouldn't it be almost better for me to go without you?" suggested Mr. Lowndes. "I'll do just what you wish, but it seems to me that if I undertook the mission I might, in some ways, save both you and him pain."

Cicely assented gratefully. "How kind you are!" she exclaimed. She knew very well that there was nothing in the world more distasteful to this good-

humoured, eupeptic man than the performance of duties which are commonly described as painful; but she allowed him, on this occasion, to assume a burden which by rights should have been laid upon her, because she felt sure that her father would be able to solace himself by speaking his mind freely to his old friend. All the circumstances of Morton's relations with his family had been so unusual that it would be hardly possible for them, in talking about him together, to give expression to their real feelings. So the Rector went into the house, and having ascertained that Mr. Bligh was up and dressed, gave his card, upon which he had scribbled, "I must see you for a few minutes," to the butler to take upstairs. Immediately afterwards he was shown into the presence of the invalid, whom he found lying on a sofa and finishing his breakfast.

"You're very early, and you look very solemn, Lowndes," remarked Mr. Bligh. "Has the church been burnt down? I hope so; because then it may be rebuilt. Heaven forbid that it should ever be restored!"

It often falls to the lot of a country parson to announce evil tidings, and, unless he is abnormally stupid, experience soon teaches him which method of doing so to select in a particular case, out of the very few methods that exist. Mr. Lowndes simply said:

"I have come to tell you that Morton fell over the cliff on his way back from Upton Chetwode last night, and was killed on the spot."

He was perhaps right in judging that an abrupt shock would do his friend less harm than a process of slow torture, but he was hardly prepared for the agitation against which Mr. Bligh struggled vainly for several minutes; because, to tell the truth, he had not believed that any father could feel a spark of affection for so worthless and undutiful a son.

"I am afraid I have been very clumsy," he said at

length, rising and laying his hand on the sick man's shoulder. "I did it for the best."

Mr. Bligh nodded and presently found his voice. In answer to the few questions that he put he was told all that was known about an accident the immediate cause of which it was easy to surmise; but it was a long time before he could talk as Cicely had foreseen that it would be a relief to him to talk.

"I feel like a murderer, Lowndes," he said at length. "I never wished for poor Morton's death, but I did look forward to it as an event not unlikely to happen and not likely to be deplored. Now it has happened sooner than I expected, and I see, as one always does when it is too late to make amends, that I was not fair to him."

"My dear Bligh, that is nonsense. You were not only fair to him but generous. Let us say, if you will, that death wipes out all offences; but so long as a man lives his offences must be remembered and taken into account. As a matter of fact, you forgave Morton's while he was still alive and had every prospect of living for many years."

"Oh, I made him my heir; I should have been conspicuously unfair if I hadn't. But that is not quite what I mean. I never spoke kindly to him, or showed or felt the slightest sympathy for him. I just tolerated him. He was treated like a leper, whom we only admitted amongst us because we were so sure that his leprosy was not catching. It was the wrong way to go to work. One should either forgive without reserve or not at all."

"Most people wouldn't have forgiven him at all," the Rector declared; "and though I wish to be as charitable as I can, I am bound to say that I don't believe kindness would have had any good effect upon him."

"Ah, well! it's useless to discuss the question now. I think Archie ought to come back; no doubt his colonel will give him leave. Perhaps Cicely will write him a line."

"Yes; or for that matter it would be easy enough to telegraph."

"No; I don't want him telegraphed for. If he is here the day after to-morrow that will be quite time enough in my opinion; but Cicely can do as she likes about it. There will have to be an inquest, I suppose?"

"That is unavoidable, I am afraid," answered the Rector; "but it will be a mere matter of form and your presence will not be required."

He remained for some time longer with Mr. Bligh and only took his leave when Cicely, whose anxiety could endure no further delay, came in. Cicely's first impression on seeing her father's face was that a delicate operation had been skilfully performed, and she threw a quick glance of gratitude at her emissary, who nevertheless went away sorrowful.

"I don't like it," thought the good man to himself, as he descended the staircase. "I don't like it a bit. I only hope that this may not be his death-blow; but it wouldn't surprise me if he never rallied. He wasn't in the least like himself from beginning to end—too much moved at first and too apathetic afterwards. One doesn't require a doctor to tell one what that means; the disease is reaching the brain."

Cicely, as was only to be expected, formed a less gloomy prognosis. She could not shut her eyes to the hopeless nature of her father's illness, but she had managed to shut them to the fact that he was growing slowly and steadily worse, and now she managed to ignore symptoms which in the case of any other sick person would not have escaped her. In the afternoon Mark Chetwode called to make inquiries, and she saw him for a few minutes, wishing to hear anything that could be learnt from the last man who was known to have seen Morton alive.

Naturally he did not tell her much. His face, which he could always and without effort render expressionless, concealed any emotion that he may have felt. Only

once in the course of the brief interview did a slight change come over it, and that was when, in reply to his request that he might be allowed to be of some use to her, since her father was incapacitated, she said:

"Oh, thank you, but I hope Archie will be here to-morrow or next day. I am going to write to him."

He did not congratulate her upon her engagement, thinking that it would be a breach of good manners to allude to an event which had not yet been formally made public, and as he had no excuse for lingering where his presence was something of an intrusion, he soon went away in a very despondent mood.

"This closes the chapter, then," thought he. "If my case was hopeless yesterday, it is doubly hopeless to-day. So far as I am concerned, the entire Bligh family died when that miserable creature broke his neck. I only wish I could forget them as easily as I shall be able to forget him!"

As a matter of fact, however, he was not able to forget Morton very readily; for he was reminded of his deceased guest in a disagreeable manner when he was called upon to give evidence at the coroner's inquest. That court of inquiry, which was held at the Seven Stars, treated him with scant consideration, and the reluctance which he evinced in answering certain questions was not appreciated as it might have been. Asked in what condition the deceased had left his house, he began by replying that the deceased had left his house sound in wind and limb. This was considered flippant and evasive, and he was very soon made to confess that during the evening Mr. Morton Bligh had drunk a good deal of wine and spirits.

"Was he sober when he started to walk home?"

"Well, that depends upon what you call sober. He could walk."

"Could he walk straight without assistance?"

"I am not prepared to affirm that he could walk absolutely straight; he appeared to me to keep a relatively straight course."

"And knowing, as you must have known, the danger that lay before him, it did not occur to you to walk with him?"

"It did not. I foresaw no special danger."

These answers created a very bad impression, and at the last of them the jurymen, with one consent, wagged their heads solemnly. They were all Abbotsport men, which is as much as to say that they were acquainted with the physical disabilities under which the deceased had laboured at the time of his demise, and could heartily sympathize with them. It might, they thought (though this, after all, was a moot point), be wrong to get drunk, but as for asking a man to drink with you, and neglecting to see him home after your drink had overpowered him, there could be no two opinions about such conduct as that. Indeed, it was afterwards said that several of them had been strongly in favour of finding the delinquent guilty of manslaughter, and had only been brought to do violence to their sense of what was right by representations that the man was no better than a foreigner. It was, at all events, a considerable time before they could agree upon a verdict of "Death by Misadventure," to which the following expression of opinion was added:

"The jury desire to record their great astonishment and regret that no reasonable and humane precautions were taken by the gentleman with whom the deceased had been dining to avert a calamity which might have been predicted."

The admirable and well-chosen terms in which this rider was couched were generally considered to reflect great credit upon Mr. Simpkins, the foreman, but old Coppard, who, as may be remembered, had a private grudge against Simpkins, said that, by his way of thinking, the jury would have done better to mind

their own business and keep their astonishment and regret to themselves.

"These things comes to pass by the will of the Almighty," was his pious comment. "Drunk or sober, when a man's hour comes he's got to die. Regretted or not regretted, the young Squire's dead, and I don't see as it'll do him no manner o' good to throw nasty dictionary words at the livin'."

Much the same, though otherwise worded, were the sentiments of Mr. Lowndes, who caught Mark up in the street, and made him a sort of apology.

"Stupid fellows! They had no business to say such things even if they thought them. Bligh will be very much vexed when he hears. I hope you won't let it distress you."

"Distress me! Why should it distress me?" returned Mark. "Is it possible that in England you really care what these boors may say or think about you? At an election time I understand that they may become important, since you have chosen to make them your masters, but even at an election time you must surely be laughing at them, unless you feel the absurdity of the position too much to laugh. As for me, an English peasant is no more to me than a Russian moujik; I should be ashamed of myself if such beings had the power to cause me emotion of any kind."

He spoke with a warmth which left the worthy Rector open-mouthed, and which seemed to betray a good deal of the emotion which he disclaimed. But in truth the verdict of the coroner's jury had not ruffled him. What he felt, and what had caused him to turn so sharply upon innocent Mr. Lowndes, was blind rage against fate and deep disgust for the scene of his discomfiture. He had now quite made up his mind that he would leave the neighbourhood and never return. He was not so poor but that life—a kind of life—would still be possible for him elsewhere.

"Rather a single room in St. Petersburg than a castle in this accursed province!" he muttered, as he up the hill towards lonely Upton Chetwode.

CHAPTER XX.

ARCHIE RETURNS

"WHY, Bligh, old man, what have you been doing to yourself? You look as if you had just had a bout of jungle fever!" was the remark with which one of his brother officers greeted Archie when he reached Aldershot.

And the others followed suit. They said it was all very well for him to pretend that he had been leading a quiet life down in the country, but that wouldn't do. "Too much London is your complaint, my boy," declared these knowing fellows; and he only contradicted them in a half-hearted sort of way, being conscious of his haggard appearance and feeling that it must be accounted for somehow or other. He admitted that he was wretchedly seedy, which was in fact the truth, and he added that he didn't know why, which was a somewhat less veracious statement. About his engagement he said not a word; for in this dreadful misfortune which had overtaken him he could feel certain of nothing. It seemed as if trouble in some shape must come of it—as if the secret which had already, in his mind, raised a barrier between him and the girl whom he loved must keep them apart for ever; though of course there was no reason why it should, so long as he kept his own counsel. There was, too, the possibility—a very remote one, no doubt, but still a possibility—that the truth might be discovered; and all day long he kept thinking of this, remembering how clear the night had been, and how exposed the

spot on which the fatal encounter had taken place. A coast-guardsman in the distance might well have seen it all.

Poor Archie had many days of unhappiness before him, but he afterwards thought of that first day as the most unhappy and the most interminable of his whole life. He had a certain amount of duty to do, which filled up a portion of it, but during the remainder he was in a state of almost intolerable suspense and misery, trying most unsuccessfully to be like himself, knowing how necessary it was that he should show no signs of mental distress, and expecting every moment to receive a telegram which never came. There was very little rest for him that night. Instead of sleeping, he tossed about upon his bed and tormented himself with conjectures. That he would be communicated with as soon as the catastrophe became known he felt certain; he could only suppose that Morton's body had not been found.

But when the newspapers arrived the next morning that surmise was proved to be incorrect. It was the Colonel who handed him a copy of the *Times*, saying: "I'm afraid this must refer to one of your people, Bligh." And there, sure enough, was a paragraph headed—"*Fatal Fall from a Cliff*," in which it was narrated how Morton Bligh, the only son of Mr. Bligh, of the Priory, Abbotsport, had met with his death in a shockingly sudden manner while walking home at night from the house of a neighbour.

"I suppose you would like to go to your uncle? There will be no difficulty about that," said the Colonel, looking kindly at the young fellow, whose evident agitation seemed only natural under the circumstances; and Archie murmured a few words of thanks.

He thought he had better telegraph to the Priory first; but before he had time to do so the second post brought him a letter from Cicely which rendered that unnecessary. The letter, written apparently in haste

and in a somewhat tremulous hand, gave a very brief account of the fatality which had occurred, and begged Archie to ask for leave and return as soon as possible.

"I would have telegraphed for you," Cicely wrote, "but papa did not wish it; he only thought you ought to be here for the funeral. He has been very much upset, as you may imagine, and of course his health has suffered; but I do hope and trust that he will be better in a day or two." Of her own feelings she scarcely spoke: evidently her mind was filled with anxiety for her father and could at present hold no other emotion.

It was with a heavy heart that Archie seated himself in the train that afternoon. He was not a man to whom dissimulation came easily, and in his short, sunny life he had had so very little experience of trouble that he could not put it away from him, as less fortunate people learn perforce to do. The more he thought of it the more impossible it seemed to him that he could meet Cicely's eyes without being detected. How would he ever be able to affect the horror and consternation that would be expected of him? How could he get through the horrible duty of following to the grave the body of the man whom he had killed? It was useless to say to himself that he had not really killed Morton, that he had been guilty of no crime. That was true; and if, immediately after the event, he had had the courage to say so openly, he might possibly have been believed; but by evasion he had made himself guilty of the crime—guilty, at any rate, in the eyes of all who might subsequently hear of it, perhaps even of his own. He had chosen to act as a murderer would have acted, and what he had done could never be undone now. So early as this he had reached the point which nothing could have saved him from reaching sooner or later—the point of regretting that he had run away, instead of facing danger. The poor fellow was naturally brave and honest, which made his plight the more pitiable. "Perhaps I shall get accustomed to it," he

groaned at last. That was the only consolation which he could offer to himself, and he had not the advantage of being able to believe in it.

At Abbotsport Road another passenger alighted, to whom the footman from the Priory touched his hat. This little grizzle-headed man bustled out of the station in front of Archie and glanced round at him inquiringly, with his foot on the step of the carriage, which was waiting.

"Oh, Mr. Bligh, I think?" said he. "Let me introduce myself. My name is Parsons; I have been sent for to see your uncle."

"I hope that doesn't mean that he is worse," said Archie, to whom the famous physician was well known by repute.

"Well, I hope not," answered Sir Peter, when they had taken their places in the carriage; "but to a man in his state mental disturbance cannot be otherwise than dangerous, and his daughter is frightened about him. Naturally enough, poor girl! This is a sad business!"

"Yes," agreed Archie, trying to say something more, but finding that the words stuck in his throat.

"Yes, a great shock to your uncle, no doubt; although, as of course you know, his son was not all that he could have wished."

"I don't think Morton could be called a good son," Archie managed to say.

Sir Peter shook his head.

"A bad fellow, I'm afraid, if the truth is to be spoken. He made himself notorious in many ways, and none of them pleasant ways. Still when a man loses his only son it comes upon him as a blow, whatever the son may have been worth; and there is always something awful about a sudden death, though I daresay most of us would prefer to die suddenly, if we could choose."

After this there was a pause, during which the

physician may have been reflecting that the prospects of the young man beside him had probably undergone a great change for the better in consequence of his cousin's death; for his next remark was:

"Your uncle's estates are entailed, I presume?"

"No; he can do what he likes with them," answered Archie; and added, "but I hope that he may enjoy them himself for a long time to come."

"Hope does no harm," said Sir Peter; "I am not going to extinguish Miss Bligh's hopes unless she compels me to do it. But her father is well aware that his disease is incurable, and, if you do not know it, I think it is better that I should tell you so."

"But you don't consider him in immediate danger, do you?" asked Archie.

"I did not when I saw him last: this affair may have hastened what is ordinarily a slow process, though. And so his daughter will get the property, I suppose? Poor child! it isn't an enviable fate to be a great heiress. And there will be nobody to take care of her except the old aunt, who didn't strike me as a very efficient person."

Archie was very nearly saying that there would be somebody else, but held his peace. He could not shake off the impression that something undefinable had separated him from Cicely, and it was a relief to him to think that their first meeting must take place in the presence of this stranger.

The meeting, in fact, passed off without any painful incident. Cicely greeted him affectionately and seemed to be glad that he had come, but it was plain that she was far less preoccupied with her lover than with Sir Peter Parsons, whom she followed upstairs. Archie went into the library, where he found Miss Skipwith squeezing a damp handkerchief in her trembling fingers. The poor woman, whom Sir Peter was not alone in deeming inefficient, had been completely set on one side for two days, and, having nothing to do,

had fretted herself into a state of nervous excitement which made even Archie's company welcome to her.

"Yes," she said in answer to his first question, "I am afraid Wilfrid is worse. From what his servant told me, he must have had something like a seizure in the night, and though he seemed to have rallied this morning, Cicely was dreadfully alarmed and insisted upon telegraphing for Sir Peter. How terrible it all is! I suppose I am very wicked, but I can't help feeling that Morton has always done everything that could be done to break his father's heart—even in his death."

"His death, at least, was not intentional," observed Archie, with a queer, incongruous inclination to burst out laughing.

"No, but the circumstances which caused it were, and they were so disgraceful, and everybody knows them! There is no doubt that he was intoxicated when he left Upton Chetwode, and I have just heard that the coroner's jury have brought in a verdict reflecting upon Mr. Chetwode for having allowed him to walk away in that state. It is very cruel of them to say such things, I think."

Archie made no reply. Everything appeared to have fallen out in accordance with his anticipations. He was sorry that anything disagreeable should have been said about Mark, but not sure that that gentleman had not deserved it. Ah, if only Morton had been prevented from starting on that fatal walk! He sat listening half-unconsciously to the lamentations of Miss Skipwith, until the door opened and Cicely came in, looking less anxious than she had done on his arrival.

"Sir Peter has relieved my mind," she said; "I daresay I was too ready to take fright. He says he would like to see you for a minute before he goes," she added, turning to Archie; "you will find him in the hall. He is in a hurry to get back to London and thinks he will just catch the up-train if he starts at once."

Archie went out, and meeting Sir Peter at the foot of the staircase, said:

"I am glad to hear that you could give a favourable report."

But Sir Peter shook his head.

"Well, relatively favourable," he answered. "I think Mr. Bligh has pulled through what might have proved to be the last stage of his illness, and it is very possible that he may now linger on for many months. On the other hand, he may take a turn for the worse at any moment. I found him a good deal depressed, but he told me that his affairs were in order and that he was easy in his mind about his daughter's future—which is a comfort to him." Here the doctor glanced at Archie and smiled. "You must allow me to congratulate you," he added; "I rejoice for the young lady's sake as well as for yours."

Then he consulted his watch, shook hands hurriedly, and ran out to the carriage.

Archie returned to the library with as cheerful a countenance as he could assume, but found only Miss Skipwith there.

"Cicely begs you to excuse her till to-morrow," the old lady said. "Her father likes to have her near him; and besides, she has borne up so bravely all this time that she is beginning to feel the reaction. Perhaps you will not mind dining alone to-night. I have no appetite, and I think I would rather go to my own room." Miss Skipwith hesitated for a moment, then resumed in a lower voice: "I am afraid there are a good many painful duties which must devolve upon you. The—the remains are to be transferred here to-night, I understand, and no doubt arrangements will have to be made and directions given. Mr. Lowndes kindly offered to help us, but perhaps, now that you have come, we ought not to trouble him."

"I am sure I shall only be too glad to spare Cicely and Uncle Wilfrid in any way that I can," answered

the young man; and in truth he was glad to be provided with occupation, ghastly though that occupation necessarily appeared to him. There was a horrible irony in the fate which compelled him to receive Morton's body and give orders for its burial; yet he dreaded that less than the inevitable conversation with Cicely which he foresaw, and the postponement of which was a respite to him.

Late that night, however, when he had done all that had to be done, and was sitting in the smoking-room with his head on his hands, Cicely stole in for a minute to thank him.

"You have been very kind and good," said she; "and now, Archie, there is one thing I want to suggest; let us never mention Morton again if we can help it. I didn't love him, nor did you; we can't pretend that we did. But we can be silent about him, and—and remember that it isn't for us to judge him any more now."

"Yes, that will be best," cried the young fellow eagerly, for it seemed to him that he was being offered the nearest approach that could be obtained to that obliteration of the past for which he longed so despairingly—"that will be much the best! We'll—we'll try to forget it all, won't we?"

CHAPTER XXI.

COPPARD'S CONJECTURES.

It cannot be a very common experience to act as chief mourner to a man who has died by your hand, and certainly it cannot be a very agreeable one. Archie, however, representing his uncle, who was unable to attend the funeral, got through it somehow or other, and his pale face and downcast looks were noticed only with approval. Everybody now knew (because Mrs.

Lowndes had taken care to inform everybody) that he was engaged to be married to his cousin, and that consequently he would at no distant date be *de facto*, if not *de jure*, owner of the Bligh estates and the large Bligh fortune; so that if he could contrive to be really sorry for the death of the disreputable person whose removal opened up such a fine future for him, he must be an uncommonly kind-hearted fellow.

Notwithstanding Mr. Bligh's wish that the funeral should be as quiet and simple a ceremony as possible, it was rendered imposing by a great assemblage of neighbours, whose presence must have been due to some other motive than respect for the deceased. Out of the corner of his eye Archie saw them all, and was distressed by an altogether mistaken idea that they were looking askance at him. After the last words of the solemn service had been read, he had to shake hands with a good many of them, to listen to their conventional expressions of sympathy with his uncle, and to hear each of them in turn exclaim: "Shocking thing!" Sir George Dare, whose countenance was habitually adorned by a broad smile, assumed an of air gravity which was irresistibly comical while uttering the prescribed formula, but allowed his features to relax into their normal set when he whispered in Archie's ear:

"Lucky dog! I've heard all about it. You mustn't mind my saying that I should have preferred somebody else whom I could name to be in you shoes. Wish you joy all the same you know!"

Well, this was comforting and kindly meant, and Mr. Lowndes, who presently issued from the vestry door was even more warm in his felicitations, declaring that the match was one upon which he had long set his heart, and that he knew it would bring great happiness to others besides the young couple. But in spite of what he had said to Cicely the night before about oblivion, Archie could not free himself from the weight of care which oppressed him, and he was thank-

ful to get back to the Priory and hide himself in the smoking-room and be alone. But he had not been alone five minutes when the butler came in to say that Mr. Bligh wished to see him, and of course he could not disobey the summons.

Mr. Bligh had been moved downstairs and was in the library again. He looked much as usual, Archie thought—perhaps a little feebler—but when he began to speak there was a noticeable change in his voice, and every now and then he seemed to have a certain difficulty of articulation.

He said:

"Well, my dear fellow, this is a sad house to have brought you back to. Among the dead and the dying it is hard to keep up one's spirits. Aldershot would be more tolerable, wouldn't it?"

"I'd rather be here," Archie answered.

"For some reasons I suppose you would. Are those reasons powerful enough to keep you here, do you think?"

He looked almost pleadingly at the young man, who replied in some surprise:

"Of course, I should like to stay as long as they'll let me."

"That would hardly be more than a week, would it? I am going to ask a favour of you, Archie: I want you to send in your papers at once. Of course, you will wish to return to your regiment for a few days and say good-bye to your old friends and so forth, but if you and the authorities could be satisfied with that much I should be glad. You see you are rather badly wanted here, and may at any time be still more wanted. After all, it would be only hastening your retirement by a month or two."

Archie signified his entire willingness to do as he was requested. Any renewal of the old, thoughtless, happy-go-lucky life which he had been used to lead in the regiment would, he felt, be impossible, and assuredly

no house which contained Cicely could ever be dull or sad for him.

This latter consideration he mentioned to his uncle, who smiled and said:

"That's as may be. At your age nature demands some outlet for latent energy, and philandering, though pleasant, doesn't quite meet the want. However, it might be supplied, perhaps, if you were inclined to relieve me of some of the duties that I can't perform any longer. Managing another man's estate is a shade less interesting than managing your own, but it is, and will be, so very nearly your own that I should think you might see to things with almost all the zest of proprietorship." Mr. Bligh was silent for a moment or two before he added: "I cannot quite make up my mind yet whether I will execute a fresh will or not. As matters now stand, Cicely will inherit everything, except the sum which I always intended you to have. Possibly it would be wiser to make you my heir; because authority ought to belong to the husband, not to the wife, generally speaking."

"It would come to exactly the same thing," said Archie.

"Oh, dear, no; it wouldn't come to the same thing at all. But there are advantages and disadvantages in both courses. I must weigh them a little longer, I think. The future, you see," continued Mr. Bligh, musingly, "is always uncertain, and is very seldom what one expects it to be."

Perhaps it was some vague apprehension suggested by these words, or perhaps it was the extreme repugnance which he felt to the idea of becoming enriched by Morton's death, that made Archie answer hastily:

"I hope you won't dream of disinheriting Cicely in my favour. I don't think she would like it, and I know I should hate it. As for authority, I hope there will never be any question of that between us. Whatever

she wishes I am sure to wish; and even if I didn't, I should try to make her think that I did."

Against such youthful and Arcadian notions of matrimonial existence it was hardly worth while to contend. Mr. Bligh, with a half amused, half sad glance at his nephew, only said:

"Well, I take note of your objection. Thank you for giving in to me about your retirement from the army, and also for helping us through these dark days as you have done. Now I think I must dismiss you: I can't talk or listen long without getting confused."

From that time forth Archie's life began to move along the lines which seemed destined to guide it through a long vista of happy years to its close. Those lines, to all outward appearance, were fallen to him in pleasant places, and were, in truth, such as he would have chosen in preference to any others; for he loved the country, and the kind of work which his uncle now handed over to him was just that which suited his tastes. But the heart knoweth its own bitterness. To talk about forgetting was ridiculous; he might as well have attempted to forget a toothache. He was a changed man, and he knew that he was changed, and he feared that others must know it too. Sometimes Cicely looked at him in a surprised, inquiring way, which tortured him. Did she suspect anything? Would she ever suspect? He brooded over such thoughts until he almost felt as if discovery would be better than suspicion.

In reality, Cicely noticed nothing more than that he was depressed attimes, and that did not strike her as surprising. Of course it must be dull for him to be buried down in the country at that season of the year, with two women and an invalid, and of course a house of mourning cannot very well be made cheerful. She thought him very good and uncomplaining, and when she was not with her father (but of late she had been nervously unwilling to leave her father for long) she

did her best to amuse him. In that way they had some rides and walks together, which raised his spirits for the time being and increased his adoration for his betrothed. She never said anything now about not being in love with him; so that he had moments of joyful hope which were perhaps as little justified as his fears.

The latter, however, predominated, and it did not take much to rouse them into full activity. One afternoon, for example, he was terribly scared by certain remarks of old Coppard's, whom he encountered in the main street of Abbotsport, and who stopped to speak to him. Coppard might have been drinking rather more than was good for him, and indeed Archie was pretty sure that he had; but that did not account for the man's disquieting and suggestive manner. For he pulled up in the middle of the street, with his hands in his pockets and his legs very wide apart, as though he did not intend the other to escape him, and fixing a steady, peculiar stare—surely it was a peculiar stare—upon Archie's face, began at once to talk about the recent catastrophe.

"'Twas a cur'ous thing to happen, look at it what way you will, sir," said he. "*I* can't account for it to my satisfaction, nohow. Come to consider the evidence and put this and that together, it do seem strange. Intossicated with liquor I make no doubt he were, poor gentleman; but then, says I to myself, if a man could keep his legs all that distance, what could ever ha' made him lose 'em in the one spot where he was sartin sure for to kill hisself if he fell? 'Misadwentur,' says the crowner's jury; and no fools they, if they'd ha' stopped at that! Misadwentur is a word as covers a power o' meanin's."

"What meaning do you want to give to it?" asked Archie, turning pale. "Are you suggesting that my cousin committed suicide?"

"I don't suggest nothin' at all, sir," answered

Coppard; "I wouldn't make so free. I on'y merely says I can't account for it—not to my own satisfaction. Don't know whether it strikes you as it does me, sir, but by my way o' thinkin' intossication don't explain it."

"The coroner's jury appear to have thought that a sufficient explanation," observed Archie.

"So they do, sir, and nobody can't blame 'em, with the little evidence they had to go upon. But it's like this, do you see, sir? A man is found dead at the bottom of a cliff. How did he come there? Well, you has to take your choice of three ways"—and Coppard solemnly checked them off on the tips of his big, blunt fingers—"there's accident, there's sooicide, and there's foul play. Now, I've been over the ground up top o' the cliff very careful, and I've seen traces o' what looks to me uncommon like a struggle."

"Why didn't you say so before, then?" asked Archie, who now felt almost sure that Coppard suspected him. "Don't you know that it was your duty to state everything that could throw light upon the affair?"

"Never heerd tell on it, sir," answered Coppard. "My dooty, as I was given to understand, was to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothin' but the truth. Now, I couldn't ha' swore as a struggle had took place. Not by no means. Let alone as I'd sooner perjure myself than I'd distress Miss Cicely. With you 'tis different, sir. The young squire, he worn't your brother, nor yet you and he worn't particular good friends, I b'lieve. Whether he come by his death this way or that don't make no great odds to you."

Archie's throat felt dry and parched. He could not speak, but stood, with knitted brows, gazing at the old fisherman, who presently resumed:

"Beggin' of your pardon, sir, is it true what I've heerd tell—that you and Miss Cicely is to be man and wife?"

"Yes," answered Archie, shortly, "it is true."

"Then I hain't got no more to say, sir. I wouldn't have Miss Cicely worrited, not if 'twas ever so. If it had been only you as was consarned I don't know but what I might ha' spoke my mind more free; but worritin' you will mean worritin' she now, I reckon."

"You'll be good enough to speak your mind here and now," returned Archie, with a sudden rush of anger. "You are making insinuations which I don't understand and won't submit to. Do you accuse me of having caused my cousin's death?"

"Lord save us, sir!" exclaimed Coppard, with uplifted hands, "what an awful thing to say! No, sir; what I was thinkin' of—since you order me to speak out—was this. It come to my hearin' as you missed your train that there night, and was walkin' about the country for a matter of two hours, waitin' for the next one. Now, thinks I, we know from Mr. Chetwode as the haccident occurred most probable betwixt eleven and twelve o'clock, and if so be as there *was* foul play, and that young gentleman was anywhere in the neighbourhood, why, he might ha' seen somebody, or heerd somethin', thinks I."

"I neither heard nor saw anything," answered Archie, telling this first direct lie with a sickening sense of self-contempt; although, to be sure, it is no worse to tell lies than to act them.

"You did not, sir? Well, so much the better, maybe. We can't bring back the dead, and I shouldn't ha' named this to you, sir—for I see it's put you about—without you'd pressed me to it. Henceforward I shall keep my mouth shut, sir, you may depend."

Archie paused irresolutely. That Coppard had spoken out all that was in his mind he did not believe; yet would it be prudent to push him farther? The man could not *know* anything, could not prove anything. His momentary flash of wrath had expired, and he now once more felt wretched, frightened, degraded, anxious chiefly to close the interview and get away.

Should he tip Coppard, or would that look too much like paying hush-money? Finally he decided to say:

"Well, my man, I think you can't do better than keep your mouth shut if you have nothing more than a very doubtful sort of conjecture to bring forward. But, of course, you can do just as you please about it. Here's half-a-crown for you; I wouldn't spend it in drink if I were you."

There was no harm, surely, in so small a donation as that; one doesn't buy secrecy with half-a-crown.

Coppard, at any rate, did not seem to regard it in the light of a bribe. He touched his hat, pocketed the coin and said reproachfully:

"Drink, sir? 'Tis little enough o' that us poor fellows gets! What I shall spend this here on is bread —bread for my missus and the young 'uns, as wants it badly."

"Well, I hope you'll be as good as your word," said Archie, turning away.

When he had time to collect his ideas he perceived that he had been far too easily frightened, and also that if he could not control himself better he would infallibly betray his secret ere long.

"It comes to this," he muttered, "that I must either learn to tell lies without wincing or throw up the sponge at once. Why haven't I got a face like that fellow Chetwode's? The fact is that I can't really be in danger from anybody except myself."

That he had already fallen into one stupid blunder he had been reminded by Coppard's observations; he ought certainly to have mentioned the circumstance of his having missed his train on the night of Morton's death. Why he had neglected to do so he hardly knew, except that he had shrunk from any allusion to that terrible evening; but he now saw that the omission must be repaired as soon as possible, and he took the first opportunity that offered of saying carelessly to Cicely:

"By the way, I never told you that you were right about my having run things too fine when I left here for Aldershot. I reached the station just in time to see the train go out, and I had to wait for the 12.15."

"Oh, did you? How very tiresome for you!" she exclaimed. "What did you do with yourself all that time?"

"I walked about. It was a fine night, you know."

She gave a little shiver.

"Oh yes; it was *that* night, of course." And then after a pause, during which Archie's heart began to thump: "If only you had walked as far as the Upton Chetwode path! But we won't think about that."

She was in truth quite as desirous of avoiding the subject as he could be, and neither then nor at any subsequent time did it occur to her to put this and that together after the manner of Coppard. Her one great anxiety in those days was to devise some means of raising her father's spirits, which were painfully depressed, and next to that she wanted to cheer up Archie, who also seemed to be in need of some one to cheer him up. If she was successful in neither case she was scarcely conscious of her failure; for both men loved her so much that the mere fact of seeing her was their greatest pleasure in life, and gave them a fictitious air of light-heartedness while she was near.

Archie, as has been said, was really light-hearted by fits and starts; and as the days grew longer and warmer, and summer set in in earnest, he began—without knowing it perhaps—to derive that sort of enjoyment from existence which sunshine and the voices of Nature bring to those whose minds are ill at ease. When a man of his age longs above all things for peace it may be assumed that he is in a bad way; but at any rate no place could be better adapted than Abbotsport for the satisfaction of such longings. After a time he went for a day or two to Aldershot, as his uncle had suggested that he should do, took leave of his old comrades, made the

usual valedictory addition to the regimental plate, and took a final part in the horse-play which he had found so delightful in days gone by. The change did him good, but he was glad to get back to the Priory again, and he told Cicely that he didn't think he should ever care to leave home for long after they were married.

"That is fortunate," she answered; "for I am quite sure that I shall not."

But Miss Skipwith, who chanced to overhear this expression of community of tastes, shook her head, for she had never contrived to banish the idea that Archie was more in love with the Priory than with his cousin.

"It will end badly. When people love one another they don't care where they live," was the old lady's muttered comment upon the fragment of dialogue which had reached her ears.

CHAPTER XXII.

VICTOR REAPPEARS

DURING most London seasons there is one particular person who is a novelty and a success. The success, no doubt, is usually dependent and consequent upon the novelty, and those who in the course of one year have enjoyed the unstinted hospitality, kindness and flattery of the British capital will do well to betake themselves elsewhere the next, lest they be painfully reminded of the instability of men and things. While it lasts, however, that kind of popularity is probably pleasant to everybody, and it was certainly very pleasant to Madame Souravieff, who prided herself upon her social gifts.

These, it must be admitted, were considerably above the average, and as she appeared to have plenty of

money and had been taken up at the outset by certain distinguished people, she had little difficulty in securing a general appreciation of them. Then, too, it was known that she was a political something or other—perhaps a Nihilist, perhaps a paid or honorary agent of the Russian Government, it did not much matter which—and that of course lent an additional interest to her ways and manners. Such was the exoteric view of her, and it had the effect of earning for her more invitations to dinners and balls than she could possibly accept. But in the political world there were not wanting individuals who took her with a seriousness which would have amused her husband immensely. Grave statesmen listened with courtesy and attention to her persuasive eloquence; some of them (for she was really a very pretty woman, and her talk was almost as pretty as her face) even went the length of saying that they agreed with her to a great extent, and deplored, as she did, the ignorant obstinacy and obstinate ignorance of public opinion in this country. Moreover, she accomplished the complete subjugation of a newspaper editor, whom she asked to dinner repeatedly, and who was so won over by her fascinations or her arguments that he began writing leading articles upon the Eastern question which caused the constant reader to rub his eyes in stupefaction. Other editors, who perhaps had stuffed wax into their ears and had resisted the wiles of the siren, exposed in scathing terms the folly of this most unpatriotic man; for upwards of a fortnight a heated controversy raged between Russophiles and Russophobes, and hints of the existence of feminine influence were printed in language plain enough to be understanded of the people. All of which served to enhance Madame Souravieff's reputation.

In short, she amused herself very well indeed, and was so busy that she had less time than usual for writing letters to Mark Chetwode and reading his replies. Otherwise she might possibly have noticed a

gradual and suspicious change in the tone of his remarks about Miss Bligh. He was very cautious, he did not say much, but then he left a good deal unsaid, and though he still wrote as if this project of marrying him to the heiress was one for which his correspondent alone was responsible, there were signs that it had ceased to be in any way disagreeable to him. The Russian lady, however, was not alarmed. She had formed a mental picture of Cicely, in which that young lady figured as a simple rustic maiden who must be moulded and directed and made use of, but who should certainly be treated with all kindness and consideration. Mark, no doubt, would be bored by her at times; but Mark was chivalrous; he would make an excellent husband, as husbands go, and he would always remember that he was indebted to his wife's fortune for the prominent political position which he would assuredly acquire sooner or later.

When Madame Souravieff heard the news of Morton's sudden death and realized that the so-called heiress would now become an heiress indeed, she rejoiced with a joy which, to give her her due, was almost entirely unselfish. She wrote a letter of hearty congratulation to Mark, from whom, in the course of a day or two, she received a very laconic reply.

"I have been preserved from exhibiting any indecent glee over the event which affords you so much satisfaction," he wrote, "because it does not, and never will, affect my destiny in the smallest degree. Irresistible as I am, Miss Bligh has managed to resist me. She is engaged to be married to her cousin, the young officer of cavalry, and I see myself condemned to celibacy, and to perpetual poverty, which is perhaps worse. For reasons which I need not specify, I have lately been cutting down a good many of my trees; but I daresay there still remains one with a bough solid enough for me to hang myself upon."

Madame Souravieff was much vexed. To accept a

defeat was never agreeable to her, and Mark's supineness in the presence of adverse circumstances had often before this caused her irritation.

"He is insupportable," she muttered impatiently. "He gives in without a struggle; and how is one to help him, if he will not help himself? An engagement—bah! What are engagements in England? They have no force, no family sanction; they are made and broken every day. This one must be broken."

And straightway she despatched to Upton Chetwode peremptory instructions to that effect.

These apparently remained without result. For several weeks she had not so much as a line from Mark, and she was growing seriously uneasy about him when, one evening, she encountered for the second time the little lawyer who had asked to be introduced to her at Lord Queensferry's soon after her arrival in London. Mr. Wingfield bowed over his folded hands and recalled himself to the lady's recollection. She smiled and extended her hand to him amiably; for it was her rule to be amiable to everybody, added to which she thought that this man of law might have had some recent news of his client.

Her surmise proved to be correct. Mr. Wingfield had heard that very morning from Mark, who was desperately eager to quit the neighbourhood of Abbotsport, and was willing to let his house at a nominal rent to anybody who could be induced to relieve him of the expense of keeping it up.

"I told him that I myself might very likely take his house at the end of the season," remarked Madame Souravieff. "Is it inhabitable, his house?"

"Well—it is inhabited," answered the lawyer, with a smile.

"At all events, it could soon be made inhabitable, I have no doubt. And so he is anxious to run away? That is very foolish of him, in my opinion. What do you think?"

Mr. Wingfield was at first not very willing to say what he thought; but after he had been talked to with engaging candour for some minutes, he confessed that the news of Miss Bligh's engagement to her cousin had been a disappointment to him, and that he, too, had doubts as to whether it was necessarily irrevocable.

"It is to be remembered, however," he added, "that if the young lady should cancel her engagement during her father's lifetime, an alteration in her father's will would be the probable consequence. At present, if I am correctly informed, she has been constituted sole heiress; but that is because she is going to marry a Bligh."

Madame Souravieff was not slow to seize the point of this warning.

"I see," she replied, musingly. "And how much longer will Mr. Bligh live, do you suppose?"

The lawyer made a deprecating gesture and laughed.

"We must not allow our attachment to our friends to lead us into wishing for anybody's death," said he, "but I am afraid poor Mr. Bligh is in a very precarious state. Under all the circumstances, I should doubt whether the marriage would take place for some time to come."

After this he took an early opportunity of withdrawing, having attained his object. It would be all very well for a plotting and contriving woman to suggest schemes to Mark which, though a shade equivocal in themselves, would doubtless be productive of benefit to all concerned in the long run, but a respectable solicitor had better not mix himself up with such transactions.

Madame Souravieff justified his somewhat uncivil estimate of her when she returned home from the party at which they had met; for instead of going to bed she sat up for a considerable length of time hatching plots and contrivances. She was disinterestedly anxious for

Mark's advancement in life; but she was also anxious to obtain control over a part of the wealth which must shortly be at Miss Bligh's disposal. No cause can make headway without funds; and although her husband had made ample provision for her, her personal expenses were too heavy to allow of her forwarding large or constant remittances to the patriotic persons who appealed to her by almost every post. It was, therefore, most desirable that Mark should be encouraged and stirred up, and there was little hope that that could be done without personal supervision.

"I must go to him," was her conclusion. "One would have liked to finish the season here; but perhaps, after all, it is best to retire at a time when one is sure to be missed. That gives one a better chance of being welcomed when one returns."

On the following morning she was seated at her writing table by one of the windows, and had already scribbled off the opening sentences of a letter which was destined to prepare Mark for the treat which was in store for him, when she espied on the opposite side of the street the well-known form of Count Souravieff's confidential servant.

"Again!" she exclaimed. "The poor dear man must have lost his head. What can he think that he will gain by sending his spies here now? He must be very badly informed if he doesn't know that Mark left London ages ago!"

But the obsequious Victor, who was ushered into her presence a few minutes later, after he had rung at the door and had been granted the interview which he respectfully craved, was able to show that his present visit was paid in a more honourable capacity than that with which she had credited him.

"*Madame la Comtesse* is mistaken," said he, in reply to her first contemptuous remark; "*Monsieur le Comte* has not sent me here to make any report to him, but simply to deliver a message on his behalf."

"That is a very regal fashion of communicating with me. However, since it amuses him—— And what is your message, pray?"

"*Madame la Comtesse* will perhaps allow me to make a little explanation. It appears that Madame has had a great deal of success in London (one would expect no less!), that she has been very well received by the Ministers of the Queen, and that she has—how shall I express it?—produced impressions which may possibly influence the future foreign policy of this country."

Madame Souravieff bent her head and smiled slightly: this tribute to her political importance did not displease her.

"Rumours of this," continued Victor, "have reached us in our retirement, and have, I regret to say, had a disquieting effect on *Monsieur le Comte*."

"Impossible, my good Victor," returned Madame Souravieff, "that you can regret that more than I do. Convey the assurance of my sympathy to your master, and, at the same time, beg him to believe that any change which I may be able to bring about in the foreign policy of this country will not be to the disadvantage of my own."

Victor said that the patriotism of Madame was above suspicion, and must be patent to everybody. Unfortunately, however, *Monsieur le Comte* was extremely sensitive upon the subject of unauthorized diplomacy, and for some time past he had feared that Madame's activity—doubtless praiseworthy in itself—might not be receiving the countenance or support of the Russian ambassador at the Court of St. James's. These fears had recently been confirmed in an unpleasant manner by a communication from St. Petersburg, in which *Monsieur* had been sharply rebuked and had been invited to exercise his domestic authority without delay. It was not considered desirable, *Monsieur* had been informed, that private individuals should claim the privilege of speaking, however indirectly, in the name

of his Majesty the Czar. Such presumption could not be tolerated and must cease.

"*Madame la Comtesse* will perceive," observed Victor in conclusion, "that the language used was very peremptory."

This was not welcome hearing to Madame Souravieff, who had many irons in the fire, and was well aware that some of her schemes must of necessity be disavowed and ignored by the accredited representatives of her country, yet whose influence in high circles had been largely due to the circumstance that those accredited representatives had seemed to take a benevolent interest in her.

"Well," she said sharply, "and afterwards?"

The valet raised his shoulders and displayed the palms of his hands.

"With all submission," answered he, "my orders are to see that *Madame* leaves London forthwith."

"And if I refuse?"

"In that case, there will remain the means of persuasion that *Madame* knows of."

Nothing could be more cogent. It is useless to dispute the commands of those who have control over the supplies, and although Madame Souravieff was not devoid of power (because it was open to her to return to her husband and make herself so abominably disagreeable to him that he would offer her any money to go away again), he was evidently able to enforce her departure from London. As she had already almost made up her mind to depart, this did not distress her much; but of course she made a great grievance of it. It was impossible, she said, to take oneself off like that from one moment to another; she must at least have a week in which to find some shelter. She had thought of spending the summer very quietly in some remote country district. Would that arrangement be considered satisfactory? It was not, she presumed, intended to banish her from England altogether.

Victor, trying to conceal his surprise at this sudden surrender, replied that he believed this plan would satisfy *Monsieur*.

"It is not impossible," continued Madame Souravieff, "that I may take a country house belonging to Mr. Chetwode."

The valet raised his eyebrows.

"A thousand pardons, *Madame*," said he; "but is it permitted me to inquire whether the master of the house would remain in it?"

"Certainly not; and if you ever dare to make such an insolent speech to me again I will take measures to make you regret it. I have already bribed you, and I could at any time obtain your dismissal: you must be aware of that. Nevertheless, you had better not disturb the Count's mind by mentioning to him the name of the gentleman whose house I propose to take. Here is some money for you."

She tossed him a bank-note (one of the Count's bank-notes) and dismissed him with the remark that he would probably be able to report the completion of his mission within a week. Then she sat down and began a long letter to Mark Chetwode.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MARK'S TENANT

FROM the day when Mark Chetwode admitted to himself his love for Cicely, he had no other wish than to leave Abbotsport for ever. He was not a vain man, but he hated to be ridiculous; and every time that he thought of his recent self-confidence he experienced a twinge about the region of the heart, which was caused almost as much by mortification as by the misery of unrequited love. How could he have been so fatuous?

—he who prided himself upon his dispassionate judgment and freedom from illusions of any kind. He stood before the looking-glass and shrugged his shoulders in dismal derision of the image he saw reflected there. What a lined, unattractive, tired-looking face! How absurd to imagine that it is possible to fall in love with anything except beauty, or, at the very least, youth! Intellectually he was perhaps Archie Bligh's superior, but physically he was beyond measure the inferior of that stalwart young fellow, and he had been an utter fool not to recognize his inferiority as well as its inevitable consequences.

With these reflections and others of a like nature to occupy him, his customary calm philosophy soon gave way to the irritable despair of a caged animal. He was dying to get away; but how could he get away without money and with that useless millstone of a house about his neck? It is even possible that there may have been yet another cause for his lingering at Upton Chetwode, and that, although he had abandoned all hope, he still hungered and thirsted for the sight of Cicely's face. That somewhat doubtful boon seemed, however, to be unattainable. The family at the Priory were, of course, living in the strictest retirement, and when he had called once to inquire after Mr. Bligh's health—upon which occasion he was not invited to enter the house—he felt that he had no excuse for further intrusion.

Chance was kind, or unkind, to him at length on a sunny afternoon when, strolling through one of the woods which bordered his property, he was brought face to face with Miss Bligh, who was returning home from the Rectory. She could not very well pass him without speaking, nor, for the matter of that, did such appear to be her wish. She looked more beautiful than ever, he thought, in her deep mourning, which threw up the clear whiteness of her skin, and although she was a little grave, she did not affect the subdued manner usual with those who have experienced a recent bereave-

ment. About that bereavement nothing was said; she spoke principally of her father, who, as she declared with an eagerness which betrayed misgiving, was very much better than he had been.

Not without hesitation did Mark make up his mind to ask whether the rumour which had reached him of her betrothal to her cousin was correct. He looked her full in the face while he put the question, and a faint flush mounted into her cheeks. But she replied without embarrassment:

"Yes, it is true that we are engaged. We haven't given it out publicly, because the engagement may very likely be a long one. I couldn't think of leaving papa until he is stronger."

Mark made use of some conventional phrases, for which she thanked him, and then came a pause. Perhaps his next observation was not in very good taste, but he had an intense desire to know for certain whether this match was one of love or convenience. So he said:

"In England and America, but nowhere else as far as I know, ladies are understood to have the privilege of consulting their own inclinations in the matter of marriage; but I have been told that this right is not invariably respected. I hope it has been in your case."

Thereupon she flushed again, and this time a good deal more deeply.

"If you knew me a little better," she replied, "you would hardly doubt that, I think. And," she added, with a perceptible touch of indignation in her tone, "if anybody has been telling you—that sort of thing will be said, I daresay—that I am being forced into this marriage for family reasons, you may contradict your informant upon my authority."

Well, that at any rate was explicit and conclusive enough.

It was on the following day that Mark wrote that despairing letter to Mr. Wingfield which, as we have seen, brought about, for one of its consequences, Madame

Souravieff's determination to become his tenant. The announcement of this determination, which was expressed in a thoroughly characteristic style, reached him shortly afterwards.

"I take your house for three months from this day," Madame Souravieff wrote; "therefore make your arrangements accordingly. Do not, however, include your exit from the neighbourhood of Abbotsport among them, or the bargain is void. I know you, my dear Mark; you are like one of those strategists who withdraw their forces as soon as they perceive that they have been beaten according to the rules of war. The people who win battles don't trouble their heads about the rules of war. They go on fighting, and then, lo and behold! it turns out that the rules of war, like other rules, have exceptions. I am one of those people, and as you are under my orders (at least, you profess to be) you will oblige me by standing your ground until I give you the signal to advance and gain the victory.

"I do not ask you to remain in your own house as my guest; that you never would consent to do, and I admit that the arrangement would present difficulties. But you will easily find quarters near at hand.

"We will not have a formal lease, please; only tell me what I am to pay. The other day I was offered a house in the country for the summer months at a rent of thirty guineas a week. Will that do? I do not choose to give less—which you will almost certainly tell me to do—but of course I will willingly give more."

Then followed instructions that no preparations were to be made for her reception. She would send her own servants down a few days in advance, and they would see to all that was necessary.

It was not immediately that Mark decided to accept this very liberal offer. For one thing it denied him just what he wanted, freedom and escape; added to which, he shrank from the idea of being compelled to simulate a worn-out love, and dissimulate a new and far more

ardent one. But in truth the offer was difficult to refuse. He could put forward no reason for refusal which would be considered valid for a moment; and besides, in spite of himself, the cheery self-reliance of the woman who had so long held sway over him moved him a little. There was, after all, something in what she said; battles are never lost until they are won. It even occurred to him as a possibility that he might be bold and confess the true state of affairs. Feminine nature is a curious thing, and have there not been instances of women who have helped the man who once loved them to marry somebody else? But he soon dismissed this preposterous idea—*une idée saugrenue*, as he called it, for he thought more often in French than in English. What seemed a less unreasonable thing to hope for was that, after a time, Madame Souravieff would grant him a short leave of absence, which it would be easy to find some excuse for prolonging. He balanced the *pros* against the *cons* for an hour or thereabouts; but from the first it had been a foregone conclusion that Madame Souravieff would be obeyed, and an intimation that Upton Chetwode would be immediately vacated by its owner was despatched to her when the post went out.

Having thus committed himself, Mark summoned his factotum, to whom he said briefly:

"Pierre, I have let this house for the summer to Madame Souravieff, and she will take possession at once. I do not propose to leave the neighbourhood just yet, so you will have to find quarters for me somewhere near."

Pierre observed that suitable quarters might be a little difficult to discover at such short notice.

"We must put up with unsuitable ones then," returned his master. "Anything will do. I am not particular."

He was in reality extremely particular; but for some time past he had been living in a state of discomfort which before his arrival in England had been unknown

to him; so that he was to some extent broken in, and was able to submit without a murmur to the prospect of housing himself in the lodgings above Mr. Simpkins the grocer's shop, which were all that the active Pierre could offer him, after a day of search and inquiry.

"It must be confessed that there is an odour of cheese and of something else—I think it must be brown sugar—which penetrates into every part of the house of Simpkins," Pierre said, apologetically, "but the rooms themselves are not so bad. It appears that several of the assistant *pasteurs*—*curés*, he called them—have lived there and have not complained. For the rest, I suppose that Monsieur has not the intention of remaining long in Abbotsport."

Monsieur, who was not given to be communicative, took no notice of the last observation; he merely ordered Pierre to pack up forthwith, and on the ensuing morning Mr. Simpkins bustled out into the street in his shirt-sleeves and a white apron to receive the gentleman upon whom he now remembered with regret that he had lately been somewhat severe while discharging a public duty.

"No fault of mine, sir," he took occasion to explain. "Personally I was dead against saying anything of the kind; but until you've served on a jury you can't form no idea of the hobstinacy of some jurymen, sir. We have to humour 'em a bit or we shouldn't get no verdict at all."

"I assure you I never thought of attaching the smallest importance to the proceedings of any of you," answered Mark, urbanely. "Pray don't let me keep you away from your business any longer now."

Simpkins, therefore, had to retire without finding out anything about the foreign lady who had so suddenly and incomprehensibly been seized with a fancy for Upton Chetwode. He avenged himself during the remainder of the day by telling his customers that for his part he didn't believe the mysterious stranger to be

no lady at all, and that foreigners were a miserable, half-starved lot at best. "Poor Mr. Morant, he was a gentleman and kep' up what I call a proper establishment; but one can't 'ardly 'ope to see another like him in that tumbledown old place."

This, however, was a hasty and prejudiced assumption, as Mr. Simpkins was the first to admit when Madame Souravieff arrived with an imposing escort of domestics, and sent him an order for groceries which caused his round eyes to goggle like a toad's. The political interests of Russia do not, unfortunately, coincide altogether with ours, and this inclines many of us to be more alive to Russian defects than to Russian virtues; but nobody can deny these people the merit of spending their money freely. It is a fine quality, and every true Briton appreciates it.

Mark was familiar with Madame Souravieff's regal way of doing things, and her faculty for making herself very comfortable wherever she went, but even he was amazed when he went to pay his respects to her and saw the transformation which a few days had effected in his dilapidated mansion.

"You are marvellous!" he exclaimed. "Nobody in the world but you could work these miracles. How do you contrive it?"

"Nobody but a nomad knows how to pitch a tent," she answered, laughing; "but when once the trick has been acquired it is simple enough. If I never had any more marvellous feats to perform than a little arrangement of upholstery, perhaps I should not look as old for my age as I do."

He made the requisite rejoinder, and then observed that she had now undertaken a feat which looked to him very like an impossibility.

"Well," said she, "that is what remains to be seen. I admit that it will be impossible unless you help me, and we shall have to go to work with a great deal of caution. Luckily, there is no need for haste. The old

gentleman must die in the belief that his daughter will marry her cousin; otherwise you would risk losing the estates altogether."

Mark pulled a wry face.

"I don't think we shall succeed," he said. "Is it worth while to be dishonourable and then to fail?"

"Oh, if you begin to make objections at the outset!"

"I don't wish to make objections; but I have a prejudice in favour of keeping my hands clean."

"You can wash them as soon as you have done your work. It is chiefly for that purpose that soap and water and religious creeds exist. The work of the world isn't clean work, as you ought to know. You belong to societies which are not over-scrupulous in the means that they employ to secure their ends."

"Do I? Well, I suppose I do. But then they never secure their ends, and so far as I know they seldom go beyond talking of the means. At any rate, they have never asked me to assassinate anybody."

"They might, though."

"Yes, that is a pleasing reflection. But public and private affairs don't stand upon quite the same footing, do they?"

Madame Souravieff made an impatient gesture.

"Let us understand one another, Mark," said she. "You have an opportunity now which does not come twice in a lifetime. If you don't care to take advantage of it, tell me so, and you will spare me a good deal of trouble. But if you will be content to do as I tell you, the remainder of your life will most likely be much happier than mine. Do you think I never look forward to the future? Do you think that, if I were a selfish woman, I shouldn't prefer to leave you as you are? Only you are too cold and too sceptical to believe that any human being can be disinterested."

He made his peace with her and promised to obey her orders, not seeing that any other course was open to him. He could not tell her why he was sensitive in

respect of his dealings with Cicely, and he was afraid that if he said any more about it she would guess. So he listened to the instructions that she had to give him, and answered to the best of his ability certain shrewd questions which she put to him with regard both to Cicely and to her affianced lover.

"The outlook is more promising than I expected," was her conclusion. "Such a girl as you describe will certainly grow tired of such a man if she has to talk to him and to nobody else every day for weeks together. Your part will be a very easy one at first. You will not obtrude yourself, but you will see her sometimes by accident, and when you do you will take care to let her perceive the difference between a cultivated man of the world and a stupid young soldier. If you could insinuate very discreetly that you were the victim of a hopeless passion, that would do no harm."

For the part assigned to him Mark felt that he possessed special aptitude, and this made him smile, which pleased Madame Souravieff.

"Come," she exclaimed, "a little courage! You shall be a Russian member of the English Parliament—perhaps even a Russian member of the English Ministry—before I have done with you. Consider the importance of that to me, and it will relieve you from the hard trial of believing that I have nothing to gain by working for you."

CHAPTER XXIV.

MADAME SOURAVIEFF IS CRITICIZED

As may be imagined, the advent of the Russian lady, with her staff of servants, her horses, and her carriages, created no small stir in the vicinity of Abbotsport, and everybody wanted very much to know who she was and what in the world she had come there for.

Thus it became imperative upon Mrs. Lowndes, in her character of local purveyor of news, to find some answer to questions which were being addressed to her from all quarters, and at the same time to gratify her own pardonable curiosity.

"Robert," said she, "we must call upon this Countess Thingummy. I hope she is all right, though I confess that I have my doubts. But I shall be better able to judge when I see her."

"Do you think she will like to be called upon?" asked the Rector, dubiously.

"I really don't know; but that isn't the question."

"What is the question, my dear? Whether she is all right? While that remains uncertain wouldn't it be better for us to avoid risk of contamination by leaving her alone?"

"A parish priest," returned Mrs. Lowndes, severely, "cannot be contaminated by visiting his parishioners. Indeed, it is his duty to visit them."

Mr. Lowndes yielded, as he very generally did when there was anything like a difference between him and his wife. It saves wear and tear to give in at first when you know that you will certainly have to give in at last; and so, later in the day, the Rector's pony-chaise was seen cutting up the fresh gravel which had been strewn in front of the entrance of Upton Chetwode.

It was seen, that is to say, by some of Madame Souravieff's retainers, but not by that lady herself, who, being in the drawing-room, the windows of which looked towards another point of the compass, was just the least bit in the world taken aback when her visitors were announced. No surprise, however, was perceptible in her manner of receiving them, and although at first she could not imagine who they were or what they had come for, Mr. Lowndes's clerical garb soon enlightened her.

Of that honest gentleman's esteem she made a

speedy conquest. She was not particularly well informed as to Anglican doctrines, but in those of the Orthodox Church (she was much too clever to call it the Orthodox Church) to which she belonged, she was thoroughly posted, and she at once led the conversation into a theological channel which Mr. Lowndes found most interesting.

"Our points of agreement are so many and our differences so comparatively unimportant," said he, after a time, "that I cannot help hoping that the dream of union and reconciliation may be realized some day. With Rome one knows that fraternization is not possible. Rome won't advance an inch to meet us nor abate one jot of her pretensions. She demands unconditional surrender, and that, I think I may say, she will never obtain from the bulk of the English nation."

"Rome," agreed Madame Souravieff, solemnly, "is the enemy. But for the Romish clergy we should never have had one-half of the trouble that we have had in Poland; and if Austria were not under the thumb of the Pope we should long ago have found some means of reconciling our interest with hers."

"Oh, but if Austria is really under the thumb of the Pope, and if that is the result of her being so, I am afraid, as a loyal Briton, I must say that I am very glad of it," observed the Rector, laughing. "We shouldn't quite like to see you and Austria making an amicable division of Turkey."

This gave Madame Souravieff an opportunity of explaining Russia's true mission in the East, and of pointing out how simple it would be to offer compensation to England, which would render the transfer of Constantinople to a civilized and civilizing power a positive advantage to her, instead of a menace: "it is a mere question of common sense and good will," she declared.

Thus the Rector quite forgot to put any personal

questions to his interlocutor, and even so much as inquiring what had tempted her down to Abbotsport, while his wife fretted and fumed at the necessity under which she found herself of making conversation with Mark Chetwode. For Mark had been sitting with Madame Souravieff and had looked, as Mrs. Lowndes afterwards declared, "most distinctly caught" on being discovered. In any case, there was not much information to be got out of him.

"A sealed book!" the good lady exclaimed, impatiently, when she was once more seated beside her husband in the pony-chaise. "One would think he did it on purpose to be aggravating, and indeed I daresay he does. Nothing but 'yes' and 'no,' and sometimes an absurd affectation of ignorance. He didn't know what had induced the Countess to take his house; didn't know how long she meant to stay; didn't know whether he himself was going away or not—didn't know anything, in short! Not that he shows much wisdom in being so reticent; because that makes it pretty plain that he has something to conceal. You remember what I told you, Robert, when he first came down here. I said: 'Depend upon it, there is some entanglement.' Well—there you are!"

"Is Madame Souravieff an entanglement?" asked the Rector, with a tolerant smile, while he flicked the fat pony.

"That, I should think, must be obvious to everybody."

"Oh, well, it wasn't obvious to me. She isn't very young, and it struck me that she was more interested in political and Church matters than anything else. A remarkably well informed and agreeable woman I thought her."

"My dear Robert, of course she's agreeable. As for Church matters, I should like to know what her Church has to say about a wife's duties. She has a husband—

that much I did find out. And she usually lives apart from him. And Mr. Chetwode has taken Simpkins's poky little lodgings rather than leave Abbotsport while she is here. If these facts don't tell their own tale, I'm very much mistaken."

"Well, my dear, if you know all about it we need not grumble at Chetwode's silence," observed the Rector, good-humouredly.

That was the sort of speech which, as Mrs. Lowndes often said, made Robert such a provoking companion at times. He never would understand that things ought to be cleared up. So long as things are not cleared up, how can you tell where you are with people? Besides, she wanted to be able to confirm, or remove, the very natural doubts felt in the neighbourhood.

At the Priory, as elsewhere, the stranger was made the subject of a little discussion; but in that house there could be no present question of calling upon anybody, and as it was understood that Madame Souravieff had only taken Upton Chetwode for the summer, not much conjecture was spent upon her.

"One of Chetwode's Russian friends, I suppose," remarked Mr. Bligh. "I hope she is paying him a good rent; for I suspect that he needs it, poor fellow!"

"It is more likely that he is letting her have the use of the house for nothing; he always seems to me to be a man who cares very little about money," said Miss Skipwith, whose *penchant* for Mark had survived the destruction of the hopes which she had once entertained on his behalf.

But Mr. Bligh did not appear to be greatly interested in Mark or in Madame Souravieff, or indeed in anybody. Ever since the attack which had followed Morton's death he had been singularly apathetic, and his painful efforts to rouse himself when his daughter was in the room were apparent to everybody except to Cicely, who would not see them.

She closed her eyes to this and other ominous indica-

tions of her father's state; but she was less blind with regard to Archie, who had changed in more ways than one. It was not only that he had fits of unaccountable depression, but that he had become nervous and irritable, and, what was still worse, was developing a tendency to be exacting. Now this was just what Cicely had dreaded from the first. She was very fond of him and very unwilling to hurt his feelings, yet, for both their sakes, he ought to be made to understand that that kind of thing would never do, and that he must not look cross or injured if she declined to be always at his beck and call.

One morning, when she was obliged to say that she was too busy to go out riding with him, he turned away with such an impatient movement and sighed so noisily that the right moment seemed to have come for reading him a lecture. This she accordingly did—with results that were not altogether satisfactory. He begged her pardon very humbly; he admitted that he had shown temper, and that he ought not to have done so; but he did not quite lay aside his aggrieved air, and that was the one thing that she had wanted him to do.

"The truth is, Archie," she said, "that you are out of sorts; that is what makes you unreasonable. It can't be good for you to live as you are doing now, without any amusement and never seeing other men. I wish you would go away for a few weeks. Why shouldn't you?"

"If you wish me to go," he answered, dolefully, "of course there's no reason why I shouldn't and every reason why I should. How long must I be away?"

"That is silly," returned Cicely, her own temper beginning to give way a little; "you know perfectly well that I only suggest your going away because you evidently need a change. Do just as you like about it, only please don't behave like a spoilt boy."

She left the room without giving him time to make any rejoinder, for she had no intention of quarrelling

with him; but her conscience soon began to smite her, and when she next saw him and noticed his woebegone countenance, she felt that she had spoken too sharply. It is not wise to whip a dog or a child or to snub a lover, and afterwards to exhibit signs of regret for what you have done. The temptation is sometimes strong, but it should always be resisted by such as desire to retain their authority. Cicely, who was accustomed to authority and tolerably skilful in the exercise of it, was not unaware of this elementary rule; but after all she had promised to be Archie's wife, and perhaps it was hardly right to trample upon him.

She therefore proceeded to undo the effect of her reproof (which had been really salutary) by saying, with a smile:

"Haven't you forgiven me yet, Archie? I was very disagreeable this morning, I know, but I want to make friends again now, and I find I shall have time for a short gallop with you, if you don't mind starting rather late."

So Archie went round to the stable-yard to give the necessary orders, and soon after five o'clock they set forth for a certain broad stretch of down that they knew of, where the exhilaration of feeling good horses under them, and the rush of the soft westerly wind in their faces, soon swept away all remains of discontent or ill-humour.

The very best way of making up a quarrel is doubtless to say no more about it, and the quarrels of lovers are generally supposed to terminate in a manner rather pleasing than otherwise. But of these two persons only one could be called a lover, and for that reason it might possibly have been better if the little scene of the morning had led to a fuller explanation between them. As it was, Cicely still thought that the young man would do well to leave the Priory for a time and amuse himself, while he still thought her proposition a heartless one. For the time being, however, they repressed

their respective opinions, and, having thoroughly enjoyed their ride, fell back naturally to those easy terms of comradeship which had subsisted between them prior to their engagement, and the continuance of which was all that Cicely, for her part, desired.

Now, on that same afternoon, as chance would have it, Madame Souravieff, who had brought saddle-horses down from London, had persuaded Mark Chetwode to make use of one of them; and so it came to pass that this couple, while jogging homewards, espied another couple ahead of them.

"Nothing could be better!" Madame Souravieff exclaimed, when she had been told who these equestrians were. "We will canter on and overtake them, and you shall introduce me. I had been wondering how we could contrive to bring about an accidental meeting."

Mark would just as soon have deferred that meeting a little longer; for the idea of bringing his old and his new love together jarred upon him somehow. But of course the thing had to be done sooner or later, and upon this occasion, as it turned out, the two ladies only exchanged a swift mutual glance of curiosity and a few unmeaning words. For four people cannot very comfortably ride abreast, and Madame Souravieff thought it best that she should undertake the young soldier and leave Mark to give evidence of his respectful sympathy with the heiress in this time of domestic trial.

Mark did not do that, being aware that Cicely's domestic sorrows were not of a kind which she cared to talk about, but he bore a previous hint of his mentor's in mind and took some trouble to say clever things without apparent effort. Cicely, who had always liked him and found him interesting, did, as a matter of fact, draw some half-unconscious comparisons between him and her cousin, which could not be to the latter's advantage. She was young; she had been leading a very dull life of late; and it was pleasant to be enter-

tained by one who had seen so much of the world and could talk so amusingly of his varied experiences.

"And now are you going to begin wandering about again?" she asked. "Have you let your house for any length of time?"

"Only for three months, I believe," he answered. "Indeed, I can hardly imagine that Madame Souravieff will care to stay so long."

"Well, that will depend upon what brought her here, won't it? I suppose she wouldn't have taken Upton Chetwode if she hadn't been anxious for a quiet sort of existence."

"To tell you the truth, I suspect that one of her principal reasons was that she wanted to give a little help to an impecunious friend," answered Mark; for he had thought over what he should say upon the subject. "She is a very old friend of mine," he added. "I used to see a great deal of her and Count Souravieff in St. Petersburg."

"And what has become of Count Souravieff? Is he dead?"

"No, but he has a chronic derangement of the liver, which makes him rather a disagreeable person to live in the house with. Besides, his wife holds strong political opinions which he doesn't share. So, as a general rule, he goes his way and she goes hers. It is one of those cases in which no blame attaches to either side, and after a certain time of life people who don't suit one another are wiser to live apart if they can, I think."

Cicely made no comment upon this succinct account of the Russian lady's domestic affairs; but she glanced at the figure in front of her, which looked youthful enough in a riding-habit and it occurred to her that the time of life referred to by Mark must be reached rather early. Her next question was:

"Where do you think of going this summer? You don't intend to spend it above Simpkins's shop, I presume."

"I scarcely know what I intend," he answered, candidly. "I wanted to go as soon as I left the house; but I couldn't run away just as Madame Souravieff came; and now——"

"And now you don't think you can run away as long as she remains?" suggested Cicely, after waiting in vain for him to finish his sentence.

"No; if I linger here in spite of the smell of Mr. Simpkins's cheese, it won't be for that reason, I think," he answered, with a laugh which ended in a sigh.

"For what reason, then?" she inquired, wonderingly.

"Some day, perhaps, I may tell you; but it is much more likely that I never shall. In any case it is an absurd reason. Let us talk about something else."

It will be perceived that Mark knew how to carry out instructions. His manner of doing so, which may perhaps, in narration, give an idea of somewhat rough workmanship, must nevertheless be pronounced to have been successful, inasmuch as he had managed to rouse Cicely's curiosity and even to convey to her a very vague inkling of the truth. It was only a very vague inkling; because, although she was aware that a great many men admired her, she was by no means ready to believe that they loved her. It was, however, quite sufficient for Mark's purpose; and seeing the impression that he had produced, he wisely forbore to deepen it.

Madame Souravieff, in the meantime, had had no difficulty at all with Archie. She sometimes, though not often, found a difficulty in getting on with women, but never with men, and if this one was a little taciturn at first, she soon made him loquacious. On reaching the point where their paths diverged, she begged him to come and see her some day, when he had nothing better to do, and took leave of him and Cicely with smiling friendliness, mingled

with just so much of formality as is becoming in a lady who has not yet been called upon.

But she became grave when she and Mark were once more alone together. She rode beside him in silence for some little distance, and then turned upon him abruptly with the remark which he had been quite sure that she would make:

"*Savez-vous qu'elle est furieusement belle, votre heritiere?*"

"So I told you long ago," he answered, drily.

"No, you said she was pretty—that is a very different thing."

"You are not going to accuse me of having lost my heart to her, I hope," said Mark, turning his impassive face towards his companion.

She gave her shoulders a jerk and laughed.

"Perhaps not. In order to lose one's heart one must first have a heart to lose. Still the fact remains that Miss Bligh is beautiful and—and that I am no longer what I was."

Mark had to reassure her and to drag forth certain long-disused protestations from the recesses of his memory. It was not a pleasant occupation and he did not enjoy it; but when he had done, he had at least the satisfaction of knowing that he had lulled her awakening suspicions. Possibly Madame Souravieff was not unwilling that they should be lulled.

CHAPTER XXV.

SIR PETER SHAKES HIS HEAD

ARCHIE told Cicely that he thought Madame Souravieff "a very good sort." She had been saying to him, it appeared, how fond she was of Englishmen and English ways; she had a capital seat on a horse, she was sur-

prisingly well-informed as to the strength and efficiency of the British army, and had spoken about it in terms of unqualified admiration, the sincerity of which it was impossible to doubt. In short, Archie was free to confess that he never would have expected to find such a combination of estimable qualities in a Muscovite. "She asked me to call upon her some day," he remarked. "Do you think I might go?"

"Why not?" asked Cicely, laughing.

"Well, I wasn't quite sure whether it would be the proper thing. I suppose *you* wouldn't come with me?"

"Not just yet. She will understand that I can't pay visits at present; or if she doesn't understand, you can explain to her."

The little that Cicely had seen and heard of Mark's tenant had not inspired her with any very strong desire to cultivate that lady's acquaintance; but she was only too glad that Archie should have somebody besides herself to exchange ideas with, and she urged him to take advantage of the invitation which he had received.

"You will be doing an act of charity by helping Mr. Chetwode to entertain her," she observed, demurely.

Circumstances, however, soon arose which necessitated the indefinite postponement of that charitable act, and caused Cicely to forget that any such person as Madame Souravieff existed. For the very next morning Mr. Bligh's valet came running downstairs with an alarmed face, to say that he thought the doctor ought to be sent for. His master had had a quiet night and had awoke much as usual, but in the last few minutes there had been what he called "a sudden change," and he was afraid things were going to take a turn for the worse again.

The change of which he spoke, and which could hardly be described as sudden, was simply that which heralds the approach of death; and even Cicely could not deceive herself as to its meaning when she entered her father's bedroom. He was lying back in his chair

with his eyes closed, and was apparently in a state of stupor. Every vestige of colour had left his cheeks; his breathing was laboured and irregular; his long, thin fingers twitched convulsively every now and then. It did not need the melancholy air and solemn circumlocutions of the doctor, who came in all haste, to convince Cicely that the time had come to bid farewell to hope. Nevertheless she insisted upon despatching a telegram to Sir Peter Parsons.

"It is a great expense and will be quite useless," the local practitioner told Archie; "the whole College of Physicians could do no good now."

"But she wishes it," returned the young man; "and what signifies the expense? It is of no consequence to her."

"That is true, no doubt," assented the other, with rather a wistful sigh (for he could not help thinking what an immense number of people he would have to kill or cure before he could hope to realize such a sum as the great man would receive in return for a comfortable railway journey and a shake of the head). "If it is any comfort to Miss Bligh to hear the worst upon higher authority than mine, so be it. But I almost doubt whether Sir Peter will be here in time."

Sir Peter arrived in time to fulfil the forecast of his provincial *confrère* by shaking his head, but more than that he could not do, except to promise that he would remain in the house until all was over—which, he added, would be a question of hours only.

"You may remember," he said to Archie, "that I warned you of what must be expected. I would have warned the poor girl also; only it seemed best to spare her the wretchedness of waiting for weeks or months in daily dread of the blow falling."

Sir Peter had doubtless acted mercifully, but Cicely felt as most people feel at such times, and was not disposed to be grateful to him for his consideration. She ought to have been told, she thought. Why had

she been kept in ignorance while everybody else had been prepared? Why had she been allowed to be cheerful and behave as though the danger were over? It had made her seem cruel to her father, who (as her aunt told her by way of comforting her) had been under no illusion as to his hopeless state. These thoughts, however, she kept to herself. There was no use now in reproaching people who had meant to be kind; only she wished they would all go away and leave her with her father, who showed no sign of returning consciousness.

But of course they did not go away. They stood about and whispered and crossed the room on tiptoe, in accordance with what would appear to be one of the dictates of human nature. It is difficult to see why one should not be allowed to die alone, since nobody thinks of grudging one the privilege of living alone; but we may as well make up our minds that, unless we have the good fortune to meet with a violent death, the last thing that we shall see in this world will be a circle of faces of preternatural length, and must console ourselves with the reflection that they will resume their usual and more becoming outline very soon after we have left them. To Mr. Bligh it mattered not at all whether many or few spectators witnessed the losing battle which he was fighting, for only his body was engaged in that struggle, his mind having already retired from the field never to return. Before midnight the universal conqueror scored one more victory, and for the first time in the history of an ancient and honourable family the Bligh estates, with all the endowments and responsibilities attaching thereto, passed into the possession of a woman.

When Mr. Bligh had ceased to breathe, others perhaps breathed more freely. They sincerely regretted one who all his life long had had many friends and no enemies; still they had known that he was doomed and they were not sorry that a painful

scene was over, and they all agreed in praising the courage and composure with which Cicely had passed through it..

With courage she might be credited, for that was a quality inherent in her blood; but composure gave way as soon as she had reached her bedroom, where she threw herself face downwards upon the sofa and so lay, sobbing miserably, until Nature obtained the mastery over her and brought her an hour or two of sleep. Nature always has the last word, though she sometimes allows us to fancy that we can command her. Nature goes quietly on with her ceaseless work of destruction and renewal, brings us health and sickness and death, makes us sad and then merry again, whether we will or no. Mercifully, however, we are so constituted that in moments of excitement or emotion we cannot believe this. We very often speak of love as eternal, occasionally meaning what we say; and when those whom we have loved most are taken from us, we almost always feel certain that our wounds cannot at any future time be wholly cured or cease to pain us. Cicely, at any rate, had somewhat better reasons than most of us have in times of bereavement for thinking that she could never again be as happy as she had been. A dispassionate outsider might have told her that it was extremely probable that she never would. Her father's death must of necessity draw a sharp line across the course of her life, concluding the first portion of it, which had been exceptionally free from cares of any kind. From that day forth she would have to bear upon her shoulders the burden of duties which women seldom discharge satisfactorily, and she was engaged to be married to a man of whom it might safely be predicted that he would give her assistance in matters of detail only. Mr. Lowndes had once told him that whoever married Cicely Bligh must resign himself to accept the part of prince-consort. It is

a difficult part to play, demanding an even temper, much tact, and not a little forbearance.

But of course it was not the prospect of the future in this sense that overwhelmed Cicely with sorrow. What was so terrible to her was that her father should have left her without one word of farewell, and that her last words to him should have been careless words, expressing no anxiety about him, nor anything of the affection which, as it seemed to her, was the one strong sentiment of which she had been or ever would be capable. It may have been from some undefined fear lest Archie should imagine that he could offer her in his own proper person a substitute for what she had lost, or it may have been because his attempts to comfort her were not very adroit, that she avoided him during the days which followed and gave him to understand that she preferred the companionship of her Aunt Susan, who was tearful and sympathetic yet perplexed by behaviour which struck her as unnatural.

It was after Mr. Bligh's coffin had been laid beside that of his son, and the family lawyer had come and gone, and the blinds at the Priory had been pulled up again, that Miss Skipwith imparted some of her misgivings to the Rector of the parish. She said:

"My heart fails me about Cicely. She doesn't care for that young man, and it is useless for her to pretend that she does."

"My dear Madam, what can have put such a notion as that into your head?" cried Mr. Lowndes, who did not think highly of Miss Skipwith's intelligence. "As far as I can judge, the young people are simply devoted to one another."

"Oh yes; but you are only a man and you can't judge," returned Miss Skipwith, with unwonted sharpness. "You don't live in the house either; so you haven't seen how she has shrunk from him and kept

him at arm's length ever since her great sorrow came upon her."

"If that is all, I don't think you need be much alarmed," said the Rector. "Trouble affects a great many people like physical pain, and makes them dislike to be touched or approached. I can quite understand her feeling."

"I am by no means sure that you do," returned Miss Skipwith, shaking her head. "She isn't sensitive in the way that you suppose; it seems to be a relief to her to talk about her father and about the past and the future. Only it is to me, not to him, that she speaks. Say what you will, that is not the way in which any girl would treat the man whom she loved."

"Well, but if she doesn't love him, why should she have accepted him?"

"We know that these mistakes are not uncommon: it is very fortunate when they are discovered in time to be repaired. My own feeling is that the young man ought to go away. The marriage cannot take place for many months to come, and——"

"Why can't it?" interrupted the Rector.

"Because Cicely wouldn't hear of such a thing; nor would it be proper. Indeed, I am not at all clear that it is proper for him to stay on in the house, under the circumstances. What do you think?"

"I don't see the harm of his being here, so long as Cicely has you to act as her chaperon," answered the Rector; "but I don't set up to be an authority upon such points. I'll ask Mrs. Lowndes if you like."

This kind offer Miss Skipworth declined with more promptitude than appreciation. She did not want to be taught her duty by Mrs. Lowndes, though she would have been willing to accept advice from her parish priest, had it been of a nature to lend support to her own views. Apparently, however, he was not to be counted upon as an ally; so in the course of a few days she adopted what,

after all, was the most straightforward plan and attacked Cicely personally.

"My dear child," said she, when she had led up to the subject by various preliminary circlings and doublings, "you are only laying up unhappiness for yourself. You have a strong feeling of attachment for your cousin, which I don't say he may not deserve, but you cannot deceive me into supposing that you care for him as a wife should care for her husband."

"What makes you say that, Aunt Susan?" asked Cicely, raising her heavy eyes, with a wondering and startled look.

"It is obvious," replied the old lady; "he himself must see it. All this time you have been giving yourself the greatest trouble to keep him at a distance; and if you dont't know why you have been doing that, I can tell you. Believe me, it would be wiser and kinder—though it may not be pleasant—to confess to him at once that you do not love him."

This, as we know, was a confession that Cicely had already made; but she did not feel inclined to repeat it to her aunt, by whom it was likely to be misunderstood. Nevertheless, she might have thought of some rather more judicious rejoinder than:

"You don't lose any time in asking me to do what would have distressed papa more than anything else. It was his one great wish that I should marry Archie, and you may be sure that he would never have wished me to do that if he hadn't been convinced that I should be happy as Archie's wife."

"Exactly so," agreed Miss Skipwith, seizing the weapon offered to her; "that is precisely my feeling about it. If your poor father had seen what I have seen, he would have been the first to say what I have just said."

"You think you see things because you want to see them, Aunt Susan," returned Cicely. "If I have seemed unkind to Archie, I am very sorry for it; but I

hope he has made some allowance for me. Such as I am, I believe he is not dissatisfied with me; and if he ever is, it will be for him to complain, not for other people. Please say no more about it."

Miss Skipwith was easily cowed, and when her niece looked at her after a certain fashion she invariably succumbed. All she ventured to ask was:

"And is he to remain in this house until your wedding-day? It is your house now, you must remember, and he is here as your guest."

"He is a very welcome one," answered Cicely. "Whether he stays or goes must be as he pleases; he certainly will not be turned out by me."

This closed a discussion which had not helped Miss Skipwith's case, but from which that of Archie derived indirect benefit. For Cicely now saw that she had put his patience and his submissiveness to a somewhat too severe test, and from that day she began once more to exert herself to please him. She began also to exert herself in other ways, and though her heart was still heavy, her speech resumed something of its customary cheerfulness and decision.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MADAME SOURAVIEFF SETS TO WORK.

ABBOTSPORT which, through all the varieties of wild weather which commonly set in about the middle of September and rage with little intermission until the middle of May, looks not less bleak and stormbeaten than other fishing villages on the south coast, is transformed for three or four months out of every year into as lovely, peaceful, and slumbrous a seaside retreat as any overworked Londoner could dream of. Then the sun shines down with strength upon the slate roofs, and

makes the chalk cliffs so dazzlingly white that no one can look at them without blinking; then the sea is at rest, and barelegged children can paddle about among the rocks at low water to their hearts' content, and the trees on either side of the road which leads to the Priory and to Upton Chetwode give a grateful shade, and every wooded dell and green bank is bright with wild flowers. At this season Abbotsport, always disposed to be contemplative, indulges largely in those habits of placid meditation which soften life and tend to prolong it; at this season, too, it does the greater part of its courting; and if there were any accommodation to be found in the place (but there is not, for the Seven Stars is apt to be a little noisy after sunset, and Mr. Simpkins's lodgings are seldom free from clerical occupation), an idle or a weary man might do worse than betake himself thither, and might derive as much amusement as was necessary for his purpose from watching the humours of a primitive community.

But there are many men who know nothing of the pleasure of inaction: men (Anglo-Saxon, for the most part, by race) who are blessed with such redundant health and vigour that unless they are tiring their bodies in some way their minds grow restless and uneasy; and these usually prefer winter to summer, because in winter they can be hunting or shooting all day long, whereas in summer there is not much to be done except to play cricket, and cricket is not obtainable everywhere. It was not obtainable, save in a very rudimentary form, at Abbotsport; and even if it had been, it would hardly have been considered decorous for Archie Bligh to take any part in it so soon after his uncle's death. Very likely the morbid irritation from which he could not free himself may have been due in some degree to want of exercise, and undoubtedly Cicely was right in thinking that change of air and scene would have done him good.

This, however, she refrained from saying—now that

she was his hostess it was less easy to say such things —and he himself had an unreasoning dread of leaving the Priory. He was still haunted by the fear that something would happen to prevent his marriage. He often thought that old Coppard harboured distrustful surmises about him; he felt as if he would not be safe if his back was turned. Hence it came to pass that when Cicely once more admitted him to frequent and intimate intercourse she was astonished and not best pleased at his fits of petulance, while he tortured himself with doubts as to whether she was not becoming tired of him.

One day Mr. Lowndes said to him:

"In my opinion, Archie, the sooner you are married the better. You needn't have a gay wedding; let it be as quiet and private as Cicely pleases; but get her to fix a date. You will both be much happier when you are man and wife."

He acted upon this not very judicious advice, thereby earning an indignant rebuke for himself. Cicely would not hear of anything in the shape of a festivity taking place for another year at least, and said he must be well aware that her marriage could not and would not be allowed to be solemnized without festivities.

"I don't think you understand how you hurt me when you make such suggestions," she said.

"I don't want to make any suggestions that are disagreeable to you," answered Archie. "Of course it is for you to decide how much longer our engagement shall last."

But he did not offer the apology which he certainly would have offered a few weeks earlier, and his tone was almost sulky. Well was it for him that he had to deal with a character which, being stronger than his own, had much of the magnanimity which belongs to conscious strength. Cicely was willing to pardon him a great deal and to overlook little manifestations of temper; nevertheless, he inevitably fell somewhat in

her esteem—which Miss Skipwith and Madame Souravieff would have considered a hopeful sign.

The latter lady, although she had the etiquette of every European nation at her fingers' ends and never infringed established rules through ignorance, sometimes thought fit to do so intentionally, and her audacity was generally smiled upon by Fortune, which is said to favour the audacious. To drive up to the Priory and insist upon admittance, notwithstanding the shocked surprise of the butler and his assurance that Miss Bligh received no visitors, was, it must be acknowledged, a tolerably bold thing to do; but she had carried through more difficult enterprises than that in her time and had no fear of the consequences.

"You must not blame your servants," she said, when she had been shown into the little room where Cicely was sitting alone; "they told me that you would not see me, so I forced my way into the house in spite of them. It was bad taste, if you will; but when one is brought face to face with one of the dreadful realities of life, one forgets all petty conventionalities—at least I do." She was holding the girl by both hands and looking kindly and compassionately into her eyes. "I have been thinking so much of you since I heard of your sad misfortune," she went on, "and I have longed to come and tell you how well I know what you must be feeling. At last I said to myself, 'Well, at the worst, she can but turn me out,' and I came. Poor child! I have been through it all—my case was just like yours. My mother died when I was a baby, and my father was everything to me. Then he was taken from me—and I married Monsieur Souravieff."

There were genuine tears upon Madame Souravieff's eyelashes as she told this concise and pathetic tale. It was really almost true, and she had such a faculty for throwing herself into any part which she might be playing that the memory of her girlhood quite affected her for the moment. Cicely also was touched and did

not resist the further advances of this sympathetic fellow-sufferer, who sat down on a sofa beside her, still holding her hands, while she talked in a low, pleasantly modulated voice about the tie which sometimes exists between a father and daughter, and which, as she said, sometimes, but far more rarely, also unites a husband and wife. Then she went on to dwell upon the many things that she had heard in praise of Mr. Bligh—his kindness of heart, his charity, his cheerful endurance of suffering; and she was careful not to breathe a word about consolation. All this was very skilful of her; for she made Cicely cry and reached the girl's heart, and was permitted to embrace her tenderly. The next step was somewhat less easy, for Cicely was by nature very loyal and not very communicative, but at length Madame Souravieff obtained an admission that Archie did not quite realize the nature or extent of his cousin's grief, and of this she took quick advantage.

"Of course he doesn't!" she cried. "How should he, poor young man? He cannot think of anything or anybody but you; and that is no fault of his. Men are always like that when they are in love. I wonder," she continued, meditatively, "whether it would be at all a relief to you if Mr. Chetwode and I were to take him off your hands sometimes and try to divert him."

Cicely jumped at this rather hazardous proposition with suspicious alacrity.

"It would be most kind of you if you would," she answered. "He doesn't complain, but I can see that he finds this monotonous existence depressing, and of course it must be bad for him!"

"That," thought Madame Souravieff to herself, "is conclusive; she not only does not care for her soldier, but she is heartily sick of him. I expected as much." Aloud she said: "Well, then, I will do what I can. I am living quite alone, as you know, and I should like to ask you to come and see me sometimes; but I won't do that, because I am sure that you would rather be left to

yourself. Perhaps your cousin would dine with me one evening, though, and I would get Mr. Chetwode to meet him."

And as at this moment Archie himself entered the room, she struck while the iron was hot. She offered no explanation of her presence, which evidently surprised him, but, after having shaken him by the hand, said cheerfully:

"I was just asking Miss Bligh whether she thought you could be persuaded to look in upon me at dinner-time any day this week. I have no inducements to hold out; but if you would come and smoke a cigar with Mr. Chetwode you would do an act of charity both to him and to me. Mr. Chetwode dines with me every now and then, because he thinks it his duty to do so; but our stock of conversational subjects has run very low, and we are sadly in need of a third person to provide us with fresh ones."

"Oh—thank you," answered Archie, glancing doubtfully at Cicely; but as he received a smile and a slight gesture of encouragement in return, he went on to say that he would like very much to accept Madame Souravieff's invitation.

"Then let us make it Thursday," returned that lady briskly, and immediately afterwards rose to take her leave, kissing Cicely once more on both cheeks before she retired.

When the door had closed behind her Archie looked notes of interrogation of the largest size.

"She came to tell me that she was sorry for me," Cicely said, explanatorily. "She was really very kind. It wasn't the sort of thing that an Englishwoman would have done, but it was done so simply and nicely that one couldn't feel anything except grateful to her."

Archie looked a little puzzled, for it appeared to him that Madame Souravieff had taken a liberty which he could have sworn that Cicely would resent.

"And about my dining there," he asked; "is that all right?"

"Perfectly right. I don't want you to think that you must shut yourself up because I do; on the contrary, I wish you to see people. I shouldn't like you to go to a dinner-party, and I know you wouldn't go; but smoking a cigar with Mr. Chetwode is quite another thing. I wonder whether Madame Souravieff herself smokes, as they say that so many Russian ladies do. I hope she doesn't."

As a matter of fact, Madame Souravieff did sometimes smoke cigarettes, but she denied herself that indulgence on the following Thursday evening, because, being pretty well versed in the principles of diplomacy, she was always very careful to avoid trampling upon the prejudices of any one with whom she might wish to ingratiate herself. Now she had reasons of her own for wishing to ingratiate herself with Archie, and it was easy to perceive that he belonged to that class of honest Britons who look with dislike and distrust upon all foreign habits.

At any rate, he neither disliked nor distrusted Madame Souravieff, who treated him to an admirable dinner and a most amusing description of her season in London. Mark took little or no part in the conversation, to which indeed he scarcely listened, until Miss Bligh's name was introduced, when he pricked up his ears. Madame Souravieff was speaking with affectionate warmth of Cicely's charms of person and manner, and Archie was looking pleased and a trifle embarrassed. After a time, the latter, who differed from his cousin in that he was not of a reticent temperament, and who was therefore far more manageable than she, was led on to mention his perplexities and the uncertainty which he felt as to what he ought to do.

"Well, it *is* a little awkward," said he, in answer to some observation of Madame Souravieff's; "old Miss Skipwith was hinting as much to me this morning, and I couldn't contradict her. Mr. Lowndes thinks, and so

do I, that there is no reason why we should not be married quietly in the autumn; but Cicely has an idea that it would be disrespectful to her father's memory to have the wedding within a year of his death; so there it is. I'm sure I don't know whether it would be the right thing for me to stay a whole year at the Priory as her guest or not."

"I think, if I were you, I should leave that question open for the present," answered Madame Souravieff, after apparently giving it due consideration. "I should say nothing about it for a few months. When she has recovered from the first shock of her loss she will very likely look at things in a different way."

The subject was not pursued farther at that time, because Madame Souravieff now professed a great anxiety to hear the game of polo described; but later in the evening Archie reverted to it.

"I'm glad you think I may stay on where I am," he observed, musingly. "After all, I have never had any home but the Priory; it isn't as if my being engaged to Cicely were the only reason for my living there. And then I think I may be of use to her in managing things —if she'll let me."

"I should remain on that account, if on no other," Madame Souravieff replied. "It stands to reason that the management of the property must be given over to you eventually, and if I were Miss Bligh I should be only too thankful to let you take it at once."

Archie smiled.

"It isn't Cicely's way, to resign her functions to an adjutant," he remarked.

"Oh, she is young; she has still many things to learn. Amongst others, that no husband who is worth anything will consent to act as a mere adjutant. But I must not venture to criticize her or I shall make you angry."

It is quite possible that such a criticism might have angered Archie a short time before; but it had not

that effect upon him now. On the contrary, he thought it fair enough; although he had made up his mind that if his future wife should decide to exercise undivided authority, no protest should be entered by him. He was much pleased with the Russian lady, whose frank friendliness and quick comprehension of his feelings supplied what he had felt to be a want in his life. Chetwode, too, was not such a bad fellow in his way. During the half-hour which he had spent with Chetwode in the dining-room after dinner he had found him agreeable and full of information on all sorts of subjects, which had been rather hinted at than displayed. An awfully clever fellow—there was no doubt about that—yet not bumptious, as clever fellows so often are.

Sad to say, this favourable judgment was not reciprocated by its subject. After accompanying Madame Souravieff's guest to the door and taking a cordial leave of him, Mark returned to the drawing-room with the ejaculation of:

"What a booby!"

"So much the better for you," observed Madame Souravieff, composedly.

"Not necessarily; a booby generally makes a good husband. If I may be permitted to ask—why did you not recommend him to leave the neighbourhood when he gave you such a fine opening?"

"You may be permitted to ask anything, but you ought to be ashamed of requiring an answer to such a question. Do you wish the girl to be cured of her weariness of him? Do you wish the collision which must occur when the question of who shall be master arises to be postponed until it is no longer a matter of interest to you? I will not call you a booby, my dear Mark, but I will take the liberty of saying that you would make a terrible mess of this affair if I were not at your elbow."

"Very probably I should; and even now—the truth is—pardon me—that it is a somewhat dirty affair."

He was thinking rather of his share in it than of hers when he said so; for he could not forget that he proposed to deceive one person more than she did; but she naturally accepted the stricture as aimed at herself alone, and her temper, which was of the Slavonic variety, blazed up suddenly.

"You go too far!" she exclaimed. "You insult me! Another such speech and I renounce you. I wash my hands of you—yes, for ever!"

"It is what I have often advised you to do," observed Mark, composedly.

She broke into a flood of passionate, incoherent reproaches, referring to many bygone causes of quarrel and making use of terms which were not always choice. It was not often that she lost her head in that way; but such fits overcame her from time to time, and were (as Count Souravieff was wont to assure her) singularly unbecoming to her. There are people who look imposing when they are enraged; but she was not one of them, nor could she scold without raising her voice to a scream.

Mark waited patiently until the storm had spent itself. It does an angry woman no good to interrupt her while her breath holds out. But as soon as he could obtain a hearing he said:

"I have no doubt that all your accusations are fully justified, Olga; I will admit, if you like, that I have every defect in the world except inconstancy. And I suppose I ought not to make an exception of that; because with your present views you would probably consider it a merit."

This was his trump card. He played it, perhaps, a little too often, but it never failed to score. The result of its production on the present occasion was that he was forgiven and begged to forgive, and that he left the

house with an inclination to laugh, tempered by a strong sense of humiliation.

Madame Souravieff's emotions were of a less complex nature. There was a good deal more of triumph than of shame in the face which she contemplated intently in a hand-mirror that she caught up from the table after Mark had left her.

"I made a fool of myself," said she to her reflection; "but I don't care! He loves me still! Ah, Miss Bligh, you are younger than I am and prettier than I ever was; but I am not afraid of you!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

BOBBY'S GLORY

A PROUD and happy man was Sir George Dare when he unfolded his *Times* one morning and found therein an account of the spirited capture of an armed slave-dhow off the Zanzibar coast by a boat's crew belonging to H.M.S. *Cygnet*, under the command of Lieutenant Dare. The gallantry and determination displayed by that young officer were highly commended; for the dhow, it appeared, had offered a stubborn resistance and her captors had been largely outnumbered. It was added that this was not the first occasion on which Lieutenant Dare had distinguished himself in a similar manner. Moreover, it chanced by great good luck that the *Times*—being perhaps a little short of subjects—devoted a leading article that day to the question of the suppression of the slave trade, in the course of which Bobby's name was mentioned more than once with a kindly appreciation of his deserts.

"Hah!" ejaculated Sir George, beaming round the breakfast-table; "that's the way to do it! I don't

know whether you've noticed, any of you, that there have been a good many more attacks upon dhows than captures of late. What they want out there is a fellow who knows how to hang on—and, by George, they've got him! There always was a bit of the bulldog about that boy."

This triumphant crow elicited the response which was expected from the ladies of the family, led by the strong-minded Miss Jane; after which Lady Dare's voice was heard inquiring tremulously whether Bobby had emerged from the fray unhurt.

"Oh, a few scratches," answered her husband, carelessly. "'We have to deplore the death of two blue jackets, and Lieutenant Dare himself received slight wounds on the arm and leg. These, however, were not sufficiently serious to prevent him from leading on his men.' I should think not! He'd have led 'em on without an arm or a leg, if it had come to that!"

This heroic view of the matter did not satisfy Lady Dare, who was only comforted on receiving the further assurance that her son was making rapid progress towards recovery.

"I can't see why we should go about the world interfering with people," she sighed. "Of course one is sorry for the unfortunate slaves: still it is the custom of the country, and we can't put down objectionable customs everywhere."

"We must do it where we can, my dear," rejoined Sir George; "otherwise our poor chaps would never get a chance of promotion. Talking of objectionable customs, didn't you say you wanted me to pay some visits with you this afternoon?"

It was not often that Sir George could be persuaded to pay his respects to his neighbours in person, but now he was in so excellent a humour that he could refuse nobody anything; so in the course of the afternoon he was driven to various houses and was quite sorry to find none of their inmates at home,

because he would have liked just to ask them casually whether they had seen the *Times* of that day. The last name upon Lady Dare's list was that of Madame Souravieff, upon whom she had decided to call after several weeks of hesitation; but on hearing whither she was bound, Sir George expressed his intention of deserting her.

"Upton Chetwode, eh? Oh, well, you won't want me there—no man in the house, you know. I tell you what; I'll just take a short cut across the fields and go and say how-do-you-do to poor little Cicely Bligh. You can come and pick me up when you've had enough of the Russian countess."

"For goodness' sake, George, don't leave me to face that woman alone!" protested Lady Dare. "From what Mrs. Lowndes tells me, I don't feel sure about her, and it is so much easier to avoid being drawn into intimacy when you are two against one."

But Sir George was already out of the carriage and trotting off with great alacrity; so she was obliged to tell the coachman to drive on.

This was not the first time Sir George had been at the Priory since his old friend's death, and he flattered himself, not altogether without reason, that he had been instrumental in cheering Cicely up. Sir George had a high, cackling laugh which was irresistibly infectious; so that it was not possible for Cicely or anybody else to talk to him long without showing at least outward signs of merriment. Perhaps, however, it was not solely a benevolent wish to divert the poor girl's mind from melancholy brooding that prompted his present visit. Sympathy is required and desired in times of joy as well as in times of sorrow, and turn about is fairplay. Moreover (but this Sir George probably did not say to himself), there is a certain satisfaction in being able to show unappreciative persons what they have lost through their lack of appreciation.

When he was still some distance from the house he overtook Cicely herself, who was walking slowly homewards from the village; and this he was glad of, because he did not want to be bothered with Miss Skipwith.

"How do you do, my dear?" said he, hurrying up to join her. "All well at home? That's right. No news, I suppose?"

"None that I know of," answered Cicely; "but I am not much in the way of hearing news. If there is any, you are more likely to have heard of it than I."

"No, I can't say that I have heard anything particular. Nothing local at least. We're off to Wiesbaden soon; but there is nothing new about that. The doctor tells me it will have to be an annual business now if I want to get through the winter without a fit of gout. Didn't happen to look at the *Times* this morning, did you?"

"I'm afraid I only looked at the first column of the advertisement sheet; I have had such a number of things to do all day. Did it contain any startling intelligence?"

"Oh, dear, no; nothing startling. It was interesting to me because it gave an account of the capture of a slave-dhow in which my boy Bob was concerned. A mere brush, of course; though there seems to have been some sharpish fighting while it lasted."

"Bobby would enjoy that," observed Cicely, smiling. "I hope he distinguished himself."

"Well, yes; the *Times* says so. Good honest paper, the *Times*, in that way, I always think. Ready to give a man credit when he does his duty, I mean. Bob was in command, you understand; so that he gets all the glory, such as it is. There's a leading article about it," concluded Sir George, modestly lowering his eyes, while the corners of his mouth turned up towards his ears, in spite of all his efforts to restrain them.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" exclaimed Cicely, her eyes sparkling. "I always knew that Bobby would do something splendid if only he could get the opportunity. I must get the paper and read about it at once." And she quickened her pace involuntarily.

"I'm not sure," said Sir George, fumbling in his coat-tail pockets—"possibly I may—ah, yes, I thought so. I happen to have a copy with me. I've been paying a round of visits with Lady Dare, and I thought perhaps Lowndes or somebody might like to see what they say. Here it is, if you care to look at it."

Cicely perused the sheet handed to her, and while she did so there came a quick flush into her cheeks which Sir George, who was stepping along beside her, with his hands behind his back and a fine affectation of indifference, saw very well out of the corner of his eye. There could be no doubt that Bobby had behaved very pluckily; and although the leading article was not precisely about him, it gave his name several times in capital letters for all the world to see, while full justice was incidentally rendered to his bravery.

"Oh!—and he has been wounded too, poor fellow!" exclaimed Cicely, drawing in her breath.

"Ah, I thought you would notice that little detail: his mother was almost crying about it. Bless your soul! men don't mind wounds—at all events men like Bob don't. Why I remember that fellow, when he wasn't more than twelve years old, getting bitten clean through the hand by a brute of a retriever; and if you'll believe me the young beggar only laughed. Burst out laughing—he did upon my word! Ho, ho, ho!" And off went the old gentleman into one of his own uncontrollable outbursts of mirth, which usually came upon him without much ostensible cause.

Now when Sir George was overtaken in this way you had only to look him in the face in order to send him into positive convulsions; and as, of course, he

returned the look, his neighbour could hardly fail to be seized by the contagion. Thus it not unfrequently happened that even upon the Bench of Magistrates two Justices of the Peace were seen rolling about helplessly and holding their sides, to the bewilderment of lookers-on who could not imagine what the joke was.

When Sir George and Cicely had laughed until they could laugh no longer, and were feebly wiping their eyes, the former said:

"Ah, well! I shall tell Bob that you've read about his little battle. He'll be glad to hear that."

But this reminded Sir George that another piece of intelligence, which Bobby certainly would not be glad to receive, had already been despatched to the coast of Africa, and the recollection had a sobering effect upon him. By a natural association of ideas, he asked presently:

"Where's Archie?"

"I think he said he was going to walk over to Upton Chetwode," Cicely replied.

"Oh, indeed! He's a good deal at Upton Chetwode nowadays, isn't he? At least so I hear."

"Yes; I am glad to say that he has made great friends with Madame Souravieff and Mr. Chetwode. I feel very grateful to them both; for he was looking wretchedly down in the mouth—and no wonder—before they took him up."

Sir George snorted. He was not fond of gossip; but he could not help hearing it, and of late it had been whispered pretty loudly that the Russian siren, whose name had naturally been connected at first with Mark Chetwode, was growing weary of that alleged admirer and was not unwilling to substitute Archie Bligh for him. Under the circumstances, would it not be the part of a friend (and a very disinterested friend, too, for that matter) to breathe a word of warning? So he said:

"Well, I really don't see what reason he has to look down in the mouth; it's early days for him to find that your company isn't good enough for him, my dear. Between you and me, I wouldn't let him have too long a tether. No offence, you know; but young men are apt to be mercurial, and they tell me that this Countess Souravieff is a remarkably fascinating lady."

Cicely did not look pleased.

"Madame Souravieff has been very kind to me," she answered. "I quite agree that she is fascinating. But if I didn't feel sure of Archie I certainly shouldn't attempt to tighten my hold upon him."

"Well, well! I daresay you're right," said Sir George, a little confusedly. "By the time that one gets to my age one has seen such a lot of trouble brought about by women that one is too ready to look out for it perhaps. Isn't that my old barouche coming up the drive? Lady Dare said she would come for me. She has just been paying a first call upon your friend the Russian, so she'll be able to tell us all about the lady's fascinations."

These, however, had not perhaps been exercised upon Lady Dare, who, when interrogated, would only say that Madame Souravieff dressed beautifully.

"I don't think I much admire those magnificent tea-gowns myself," she added. "In a large house, full of people, they may be all very well, but when one is living quite alone and doesn't expect to receive any visitors, except a single young man——"

"Yes? What then?" inquired Cicely, blandly; for she had caught Sir George in the act of making a face at his wife, and it seemed desirable to show that she had no objection in the world to Archie's intimacy with her neighbour.

"Oh, nothing," answered Lady Dare, hastily; "I don't think I should do it myself, that's all. But no doubt their customs are different in St. Petersburg. Indeed, now I come to think of it, I believe I have

heard that men pay afternoon calls in evening dress there—which shows that we can't judge Russians by our standards. Now, George, we really ought to be going; I had no idea it was so late."

Lady Dare spoke with more freedom as soon as she was out of Cicely's hearing.

"I am very glad that we are going away so soon,' saidshe; "I certainly shouldn't like the girls to see much of that woman. It may be all right, but she and young Bligh went on together in a way which I must say surprised me. One would have supposed that they had been acquainted all their lives."

"I'm sure I've no objection, since Miss Cicely appears to have none," observed Sir George. "If that young fellow prefers flirting with a married woman to staying at home with the girl to whom he is engaged—why we know somebody else who has better taste. She was very much interested in hearing about Bob's success. Got quite excited over it, in fact."

Lady Dare said it was very wrong to talk in that light way about a serious matter. For her part, she would be greatly distressed if anything should occur to bring about a breach between the cousins.

"And I do hope, George, that you will not be so imprudent as to hint at the possibility of such a thing. You know how censorious people are, and how certain they would be to accuse us of wishing to make a fine match for Bobby."

Nevertheless, a smile hovered about her lips during the remainder of the drive, and if she amused herself by building certain castles in the air, there was no great harm in that. What would life be worth to any of us if we were debarred from sometimes dreaming of delightful improbabilities?

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CLUMSINESS AND SKILL

In some far-away future time, when those who believe in the perfectibility of the human race shall be able to point to some rather more convincing grounds for the faith that is in them than they can show as yet, it is possible that men and women may cease to judge by appearances, which, as we all know, are quite as often misleading as not. With our present imperfect comprehension of one another, however, there does not seem to be very much else to judge by; and if a young man will persist in presenting himself five or six times a week at the house of a lady who is living all by herself, he must not complain of the usual deductions being drawn from his behaviour.

The usual deductions were drawn in Archie Bligh's case, and a very general shaking of heads ensued. Among the heads which were shaken most frequently and most vehemently was that of Mrs. Lowndes, who said to her husband:

"I call it nothing short of a scandal, Robert. Now I know what you are going to say; you are going to accuse me of want of charity, as you always do. Though what true charity there can be in deliberately shutting one's eyes to wrong-doing I will leave you to explain in your next sermon—if you can."

"I could very easily explain, Amelia, that it is uncharitable to keep one's eyes steadily fixed upon those who are supposed to be doing wrong, but it wouldn't be be worth while to preach a sermon upon that theme, because, as you have so often told me, my sermons fail to awaken your conscience. In this instance I suspect that the usual clearness of your vision is obscured by prejudice against Madame Souravieff, who doesn't seem to care much about talking to you."

"How strange it is, Robert, that anxious though you are to find fault with me, you invariably pitch upon faults of which nobody else would ever dream of accusing me! Whatever I may be, I am not easily prejudiced, and I can assure you that I never wished or expected Madame Souravieff to enjoy talking to me. She evidently does not enjoytalking to any one of her own sex. A man she will always think it worth her while to make a fool of—even though he may be quite an old man and she may be obliged to affect a knowledge of theology before she can do it."

"Meaning me?" inquired the Rector, good-humouredly.

"I mean just what I say; she knows that no man can hold out against a little flattery. I can't help being rather sorry for that unfortunate young Bligh, in spite of his silliness; and yet, when I think of poor Cicely, I long to box his ears!"

Mr. Lowndes said:

"Cicely would hardly thank you for your interference, my dear. She is remarkably well able to manage her own affairs, and you may depend upon it that she knows a good deal more about Madame Souravieff and Archie than you do. You surely are not so simple as to suppose that he can go anywhere without telling her where he is going?"

Nevertheless, the Rector was not quite so free from uneasiness as he pretended to be. His wife was by no means the only person who had spoken to him upon a subject which was attracting general attention, and although he would not allow himself to doubt Archie's loyalty, he could not help a silent admission that it looked very much as though Madame Souravieff were trying to make a conquest of the young fellow.

This surmise was not altogether wide of the mark; for Madame Souravieff had in truth thought at first that something might be done in that direction. She had, however, speedily perceived that such an attempt

would be a waste of time, and had contented herself with establishing a gradual ascendency over her victim, in her private relations with whom she was pleased to assume the part of an elderly but sincerely sympathetic friend. And the matter as to which she felt (and said) that he was more especially deserving of commiseration was that of his very trying position with regard to his future wife. With great delicacy and infinite precaution, she brought him to see that it was his duty to assert himself. "Authority," his uncle had once said to him, "ought to belong to the husband." He repeated this observation to Madame Souravieff; and although her own manner of life had hardly been ordered in consonance with that theory, she at once declared herself a supporter of it.

"But that is elementary!" she exclaimed; "everybody knows that no other system is practicable."

It may very well be that such is the case, and that Mr. Bligh had been quite right in the conviction which he had expressed. But then he had omitted to give effect to his conviction; and the consequence of that omission seemed not unlikely to prove serious. It was, as Madame Souravieff had foreseen, a mere question of time; and the unavoidable crisis was precipitated by an incident which answered the purpose as well as another. The partial management of the property which Archie had assumed before his uncle died had not been taken out of his hands, and although Cicely now held the reins, the agent, the land-steward, and others had not ceased to seek interviews with him when they had reports or requests to make. It was to Archie, therefore, that the agent came one morning with an inquiry as to what was to be done about that troublesome fellow Coppard. Coppard, it appeared, had paid no rent for a very long time past. He had always begged for extension of time, and, by the late Mr. Bligh's directions, that extension had always been granted to him; but really, said the agent, limits must be fixed somewhere.

His own opinion was that if the man couldn't or wouldn't pay, he ought to be turned out. The village would be well rid of him anyhow; for he was constantly leading other men into mischief.

Archie may perhaps have felt that it would be a relief to him personally if circumstances should lead to the removal of Mr. Coppard from Abbotsport; but he was not conscious of any unworthy motive when he spoke to Cicely upon the subject and advised her in the sense advocated by the agent.

"Of course one would rather not turn people out of doors," he said; "but in this case there really seems to be no alternative."

"I will see Coppard;" answered Cicely, after considering for a moment. "If he can pay anything, well and good; if not, it must stand over."

There was an authoritative decision in her tone which provoked Archie.

"You can do as you please," said he; "but I warn you that you won't be able to go on like that. It's one thing to show reasonable consideration for your tenants and quite another to let them live in your cottages rent-free. What you do for one you'll have to do for all—and then you'll find yourself in a pretty mess!"

"I believe most of the tenants pay punctually," answered Cicely. "There are a few who are very poor, and who look to a big catch of fish to bring them in what little money they can earn. My father never was hard upon them, nor shall I be."

"I am not suggesting that you should be hard upon anybody who tries to gain an honest livelihood," returned Archie; "but Coppard doesn't. The fact is that he is a poaching, thieving, drunken vagabond."

Now Cicely had a liking for Coppard, and she had a very strong constitutional dislike to dictation. Therefore she rejoined, with a slight laugh:

"Oh, I know he isn't a friend of yours; you have

never forgiven him for accusing you of sea-sickness that afternoon when we so nearly went to pieces on the bar."

"I didn't remember his having accused me of anything of the kind," replied Archie—which, indeed, was true. "My only reason for wanting to turn the man out was that I see what a bad precedent you will create if you don't. One must have rules and stick to them if one is to manage an estate upon any workable principle."

"I must do what seems to me to be right," returned Cicely, colouring a little. "I have the responsibility, and I can only use my own judgment."

"Ah, yes; there it is!" observed the young man, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"I suppose you mean that my judgment is a poor thing to trust to."

"No; only that I wish you didn't insist upon taking the whole responsibility. It isn't necessary, you know."

"I can't give it up or—or share it with anybody," answered Cicely, in a voice which sounded none the less uncompromising because it trembled a little. "My father left it to me."

"Yes; but when he left it to you he didn't forget that you were engaged to be married. I doubt whether it was his intention that your husband should be a mere cypher."

For an instant Cicely looked as though she were going to make some angry retort; but she only bit her lips and reverted to the original subject of dispute.

"At all events," she said, "I won't have the Coppards disturbed."

If Archie had been a sensible man he would have said no more; but he was not a very sensible man, and he had listened to perfidious counsels, and he thought that he would be acting foolishly if he abandoned the struggle.

"I don't dispute your right to refuse me any control over your affairs," was the next observation which he judged it advisable to make, "but it does seem to me that you make a mistake in insisting so strongly upon your rights. Other people think so too, as I happen to know."

"Oh—other people!" returned Cicely, pricking up her ears. "What other people, for instance?"

"Well, Madame Souravieff for one. No one can admire you more than she does; so that she certainly isn't an unfriendly critic. But of course she has seen a lot of the world and had a great deal of experience of one kind and another, and——"

"And notwithstanding all these advantages," interrupted Cicely, "she hasn't so much as learnt that it is rather bad taste to make criticisms upon me before you. I don't complain of her criticisms—they may be fair, and it matters very little to me whether they are or not—but I do complain of your allowing her to make me the subject of any discussion with you. I don't think that is loyal; and it almost makes me believe——"

She stopped herself just in time to avoid saying something which would have justified Archie in responding by a *tu quoque*. It was a pity that she did not go on; for had she done so, a clearance of the atmosphere would have been the probable result. As it was, Archie only saw that she was determined to have her own way and would tolerate no approach to opposition. He said, with an aggrieved air:

"I always thought you wanted me to make a friend of Madame Souravieff. It wasn't very unnatural that I should talk to her about you, and I had no idea that you would object to it. As for her criticisms, they were innocent enough. Well, we had better drop the subject, I suppose. I'll try to interfere as little as possible for the future."

Cicely left him without making any overtures for peace. She did not at all like his tone, and in spite of

his disclaimer she still thought he had been very much to blame in talking her over with another woman. The poor fellow had indeed committed every blunder that it was possible to commit. He had challenged a naturally combative temperament, he had allowed it to be seen that he was acting under outside influences, and from first to last he had been petulant instead of conciliatory. Women may frequently be coaxed and almost always coerced, but to attempt to deal with them in a weak and complaining spirit is to woo disaster.

Consequently, Cicely marched out of the house, shortly afterwards, with head erect and not an atom of repentance or compunction in her heart.

"He is not my husband yet," she was thinking. "When he is I shall of course obey him, unless he orders me to do something positively infamous, such as turning an unfortunate family out of house and home; but for the present he has no business to tell me what I ought to do—and certainly Madame Souravieff has none. I have always doubted whether I really liked that woman, and now I am sure that I don't. She is very pleasant while one is talking to her, but when one comes to think her over afterwards one gets an impression of insincerity somehow."

That was an impression which a great many people had formed of Madame Souravieff, and which was probably due to the circumstance that she had no sort of regard for literal truth. Setting that idiosyncrasy aside, she was in reality a somewhat unusually sincere person, being gifted with strong faith in several things and in a fair number of individuals, and always shaping her actions in harmony with her beliefs. She was a good deal more sincere, for example, than Mark Chetwode, who at that moment was pacing the narrow streets of Abbotsport, with slow step and a preoccupied mien. It was not Mark's habit to frequent the Abbotsport streets, which were

scarcely inviting to a pedestrian at the best of times, and were especially objectionable in sultry summer weather, but he was putting up with the rough pavement and the bad smells now because it was Wednesday, and because he had discovered that on Wednesday afternoons Cicely invariably visited the almshouse and the modest little hospital. Moreover, he had heard Madame Souravieff invite Archie to look in about tea-time.

The patience with which he strolled up and down the main thoroughfare under the inquisitive eyes of the inhabitants was at length rewarded; and if he was glad to see Miss Bligh, she was very nearly as glad to see him.

"You are the very person," was her first remark, "whom I wanted to meet."

"Indeed?" said Mark, with a slight air of surprise. "In that case I rejoice that chance should have brought me this way. Although," he added, smiling faintly, "I am afraid I must not flatter myself that it was for my own sake that you wanted to meet me."

"Well, not altogether," confessed Cicely, candidly. "There are a few questions which I should like to ask you; but we can't talk comfortably here. Are you busy?"

"If I were I should be only too happy to neglect my business; but of course I am not. How could I be?"

"Shall we walk down to the beach, then?" suggested Cicely. "I know of a place where there is shade at this time of the day, and where we are not likely to be interrupted."

This speech was one of a kind to which Mark had never yet been able to accustom himself, despite his growing familiarity with English ways. That such an invitation could be addressed by an unmarried woman to any man was to him so strange as to

be almost comical; and his pleasure in accepting it was somewhat marred by the thought that it never could have been given in that matter-of-course, unembarrassed fashion if his sentiments had even been dimly suspected. Still it was something to have been granted an excellent opportunity of making them known. When Cicely had conducted him to the sequestered cove of which she had spoken, and had seated herself upon a shelf of rock, motioning him to do likewise, he broke off in the middle of a humorous description of Mr. Simpkins's lodgings to say:

"And your questions, Miss Bligh—I am dying with curiosity to hear what they can be."

"Are you?" she returned, laughing a little; "you don't look as if you were. But then you never do look as if you felt a shadow of curiosity about anything."

"My looks belie me," answered Mark, gravely. "I don't know that I am a very curious person, but I often feel a great deal of curiosity—about you."

Cicely allowed this observation to pass, and said, with some abruptness:

"I want to hear a little more about Madame Souravieff. I think you understand her and I am not at all sure that I do. Why is she trying to make Archie dissatisfied?"

Mark flicked pebbles across the sand with his stick and remained silent for some seconds. At length he answered with apparent reluctance:

"Madame Souravieff is an old friend of mine."

Cicely coloured. She had not only received a very direct snub, but, what was worse, she felt that she had earned it.

"I beg your pardon," said she; "I ought to have remembered that. Of course you don't like to say anything against her."

"Well, I would rather not," Mark confessed; "still I might just as well tell the truth as hold my tongue.

If I could have told you that she was not trying to make your cousin dissatisfied, I should have done so—naturally." Here he paused; but as Cicely did not choose to commit herself to any further interrogatories, he resumed presently: "Madame Souravieff has a defect which is not very uncommon, nor, I suppose, very inexcusable: she likes admiration. I don't say that she would go any lengths to secure an admirer, but I think she would go a very long way. Then I believe she honestly imagines that you have as good reason to be dissatisfied as he has, and that she is doing you a service by—by leading him away. For my own part," added Mark, "I confess that I blame him more than her."

Cicely had not bargained for so outspoken a reply as that, and was sorry that she had invited it. Having done so, however, she could not reasonably take offence; so she merely observed:

"Perhaps your reading of the situation may not be altogether correct."

"Perhaps not," he agreed. "I was going to say I hope it isn't; but that would be scarcely honest. For your sake, I hope—forgive my candour—that it is."

"I don't know what you mean," Cicely declared, turning a displeased pair of eyes upon him. "Why do you say that?"

"Ah, Miss Bligh, I shall certainly offend you if I tell you."

"I wish you to tell me."

"Very well; it is easily told. I know—although you would not admit it—that you do not love the man whom you have promised to marry. The rest signifies very little. He may be unworthy of you, he may be less disinterested than he appears to be at first, and Madame Souravieff may be an unprincipled flirt. Or possibly none of these things may be so. What I am certain of is that you could never be happy as your cousin's wife, and that is why I hope I am right in my reading of a situation which at least I may claim to

have studied closely. Now I have offended you, as I knew I should, and I had better say good-bye."

He rose as he spoke, and Cicely followed his example. She had an odd feeling that she ought to be more affronted than she was. When Mark looked at her in a grave, interrogative way, she did not dismiss him, as he was apparently waiting for her to do, but only said:

"You are like everybody else in these parts; you think that Archie is marrying me simply because I am rich. For what reason you think I am marrying him I don't know. But it doesn't much matter. Let us talk about something else."

"By all means," answered Mark, with his customary half-smile. "About the other questions which you had to ask me, for instance?"

"No, I think not; my curiosity is sufficiently satisfied for one day. You can go on giving me your impressions of the population of Abbotsport; that is a subject which interests me, without being too exciting."

And while he walked back to the village with her, he did as he was requested, doing it amusingly enough. He had shot his bolt, and was satisfied that he had hit the mark. If Madame Souravieff could have overheard what he had said that afternoon she would probably have pronounced him unskilful; but then she knew a great deal less about the peculiarities of Cicely's character than he did.

CHAPTER XXIX.

COUNT SOURAVIEFF'S CORRESPONDENCE

DURING that summer there used to be seen, hobbling up and down the alleys at Wiesbaden, or sitting in the Cursaal Gardens while the band played in the after-

noons and evenings, a little old man with a clean-shaven face, the skin of which was covered with as infinite a number of wrinkles as that of Rembrandt's mother would appear to have been. He always wore a tall hat; also a black frock-coat, which hung loosely upon him, and in the button-hole of which were sundry scraps of coloured ribbon, whereby the initiated were made aware that he was the possessor of several highly coveted decorations. This gentleman was known by dwellers in the hotel at which he had taken up his quarters to be Count Souravieff, and was reported to be fabulously wealthy. He was in truth a very rich man, though of course not so rich (because nobody ever is) as he was believed to be. He had also been in his day a somewhat distinguished one, having held offices of importance; and he was now, owing to the worries brought upon him by an eccentric wife, together with the perpetual discomfort resulting from an unruly liver and chronic gout, a most thoroughly miserable one.

Of this, indeed, he made no secret, and would confide his woes in a plaintive, querulous voice to all who could be persuaded to listen to them.

"Ah, madame," he would say (for it was chiefly to ladies that he was wont to appeal for pity), "you see in me an unfortunate condemned to purgatory before his time! For my part, I do not believe in a future state of purgatory—you are aware, perhaps, that our Church has never accepted that dogma—and it is therefore the more hard that I *should* be compelled to admit its existence in this world without having done anything at all to deserve it." And then, with a very little encouragement, he would proceed to relate what a terrible life he had had of it for years past with the Countess. "I live in terror, madame—positively in constant terror. I do not know what fresh scandal I may not hear of any day—I who abhor scandal! You will ask, perhaps, why I allow her to live apart from me? Ah, madame, that is because you do not know Madame

Souravieff! She is a woman who has raised the power of exasperation to a fine art. At my age and in my state of health I am no longer able to endure what I could put up with when I was younger and stronger. *Enfin!*—death comes at last to all, and one may hope that after death comes at least peace."

Ladies very generally felt sorry for this forlorn and forsaken invalid; but the sympathy of the small battalion of dependents with whom he travelled about was denied to him, because he was so cross and capricious. As, however, he paid them very well, they remained in his service and hoped that in making his will he would remember how forbearing they had been with him. Victor, his valet, had gradually become his master—a lucrative post; for it was not Madame Souravieff alone who found it advisable to replenish Victor's purse from time to time. The man, upon the whole, used his power for the general good and did not cheat those who bribed him, unless it seemed quite necessary for his own comfort and security that he should do so. For the general good it was almost always necessary to deceive Count Souravieff; but that was really no fault of his. It would never have done, for example, to let the old gentleman know who Mr. Chetwode's tenant was; and Victor had confined himself to the statement that Madame had taken a country house in a remote part of England for the summer months. As the Count did not correspond with his wife, and did not care where she might be so long as she was out of mischief, that assertion was accepted without further inquiry.

But one meets all sorts of people at Wiesbaden, and in these days the well-to-do inhabitants of every county in England, remote or otherwise, are pretty sure to leave it at least once a year. There was, therefore, nothing extraordinary, although to some persons it may have been inconvenient, in the coincidence which brought Count Souravieff upon speaking terms with Sir George Dare. Sir George, when abroad, made it a

rule to speak to everybody who appeared approachable, and even to some who did not. Amongst the latter might have been counted the peevish-looking little old man whom he noticed on two consecutive evenings sitting all alone in the garden in front of the hotel; but that, perhaps, was all the more reason for trying to cheer the melancholy stranger up. On the third day, accordingly, Sir George, who had just lighted his after-dinner cigar, plumped himself down upon an iron chair facing Count Souravieff and opened fire.

"How do these waters suit you, sir? One don't seem to get much good out of 'em at first; but I believe in the after effects. I find that by coming here every summer I can keep pretty clear of the gout for a twelvemonth. The great thing is to have faith."

"I am full of faith," replied the Count, gravely. "I have tried very nearly all the waters in Europe now, and I grow steadily worse. Yet I go on trying. It is impossible to be more faithful."

"Grow worse?—do you really?" said Sir George, much interested. "Where does it catch you, now? With me it isn't so much in the feet or hands; that I shouldn't mind; let's have a good sharp fit, and have done with it. But the nuisance is that sort of all-overishness that one gets ever so long before matters come to a climax. I always tell my doctor that I really can't see the use of him unless he can stop what he calls symptoms. Why, the symptoms are worse than the disease—what?"

Symptoms have at least one small advantage which is that they afford an agreeable subject for discussion; and especially so when you are able to discuss them with one who has experienced them all, only in a more aggravated form. On the other hand, if you are the greater sufferer of the two, that gives you a certain prestige; and so it was that these two patients formed a high opinion of each other's intelligence and conversational capacities. The Count, who spoke excellent

English, related in detail and with deep feeling the results of the various cures to which he had been persuaded to give a trial, while Sir George, listening open-mouthed, thanked his stars that, however bad he might be, he wasn't so bad as all that. Presently, at the latter's suggestion, they strolled as far as the Cursaal Gardens, where the band was playing; and then Sir George judged that the proper time had come for him to reveal his identity. He accordingly fumbled in his pocket and produced a visiting-card, which he handed to the Russian, who could do no less than return this act of courtesy.

"God bless me!" exclaimed Sir George, after holding up to the light the rather large and highly glazed bit of pasteboard which bore Count Souravieff's name; "what a very odd thing! I think it must be your wife who has recently become a neighbour of ours—a temporary neighbour, that is. She has taken Upton Chetwode, a place near us, for a few months."

"The lady of whom you speak is no doubt my wife," replied the Count, drawing down the corners of his mouth. "Since you are acquainted with her, it is needless to tell you that my wife occupies herself a great deal with politics, and that her political crusades are continually getting me, as well as herself, into trouble. Only the other day I was obliged to insist upon her leaving London, where she had made herself so conspicuous as to bring down upon me a very sharp rebuke from our Foreign Office."

Sir George pursed up his lips and nodded.

"Oh," said he, "that was the reason she buried herself for the summer in our quiet part of the world, then? To tell you the truth, we were puzzled to imagine what her reason could be."

"Madame Souravieff," answered that lady's husband, gravely, "has usually more than one reason for her actions, but not all of them are as good as that which I

have mentioned. May I ask you to tell me once more the name of the house in which she is living?"

"Upton Chetwode. I think you know Mark Chetwode, the owner. At any rate he is a great friend of the Countess's, and he has established himself in lodgings in the village during her tenancy, in order, I suppose, to be near her."

Sir George knew that this was a rather risky thing to say; but he could not resist saying it, and watching the effect upon his companion, who indeed pulled a wry face and muttered something inaudible. But before anything more could be said on either side Lady Dare and her daughters appeared upon the scene, and an introduction followed which presently furnished the Count with an auditor of the sex which he preferred. The Dares had a good many friends in Wiesbaden, some of whom soon joined the young ladies, while Sir George was button-holed by a Conservative M.P., who had paired for the remainder of the session and had a great deal to say about the obstructive tactics of the Opposition. Thus Count Souravieff was left to walk with Lady Dare up and down the broad gravelled expanse in front of the Cursaal, which was thronged by a thousand or so of other *Curgäste*, and he lost no time in telling her of his conjugal troubles, to which she lent a willing and compassionate ear.

"It is very distressing for you, and very wrong of her," Lady Dare said, when he had concluded his recital; "still I doubt whether you have any cause for anxiety as regards Mr. Chetwode, who seems to have other designs."

She then explained at some length the position of affairs at Abbotsport, and related how Archie Bligh had apparently been seduced from his allegiance, adding with an annoyed look:

"I had a letter this morning from Mrs. Lowndes, the wife of the parish clergyman, which throws a very

disagreeable light upon Mr. Chetwode's character. From what she tells me, I can't but think that he is trying to kill two birds with one stone. He probably wishes to free himself from Madame Souravieff, and is also anxious to bring about a quarrel between young Bligh and his cousin, who, as I mentioned to you just now, is a great heiress. I am afraid—I am very much afraid—that his object is to take young Bligh's place."

Lady Dare spoke with no little emotion; because it did seem to her atrocious that, if this engagement was to come to nothing, poor Bobby should derive no advantage at all from its annulment. As for Count Souravieff, he naturally did not care much what Mr. Chetwode's character or designs might be; but he was irritated by his wife's audacity in taking up her residence at Mr. Chetwode's house, and when he returned to the hotel Victor had a bad five minutes.

The valet, of course, protested his ignorance of Madame's whereabouts, and his master told him roundly that he did not believe a word he said. Thereupon Victor rejoined with dignity that since he was no longer trusted, he would prefer to give up his situation. Now there were certain secrets connected with the Count's toilet and the treatment of his ailments which Victor alone possessed. Count Souravieff, therefore, had to do what many potentates have to do when indispensable personages tender their resignation, and eat humble pie. However, he did not deem it advisable to despatch this doubtful envoy upon a third special mission to England. He determined, instead, to depart so far from his custom as to write to his wife, and before retiring to bed he composed the following epistle:

"MADAME,

"Although I am well aware that the word discretion has no place in your dictionary, I have reason to believe that you are not usually blind to the dictates of ordinary prudence. I have therefore learnt with sur-

prise that you have considered it prudent to defy me in what, even for you, must be called a peculiarly imprudent manner. I shall scarcely be accused of jealousy, yet I have a certain regard for the credit of the name which you still share with me, and a certain aversion to be rendered publicly ridiculous. In becoming the tenant of Mr. Chetwode, whom you have pursued from one country to another with little care for your reputation or mine, and by persuading him to take up his residence in close proximity to you, you exceed all permissible limits, and I have to request that your tenancy shall cease forthwith. Any extra expense which this may entail I shall, as usual, be prepared to meet; but I must beg you to understand that I expect to be obeyed. In the event of non-compliance I shall see myself compelled, much against my will, to stop the monthly remittances which I have hitherto caused to be paid to you.

"Receive, Madame, the assurance of my very high consideration.

"BORIS SOURAVIEFF."

This, the Count felt, was both dignified and business-like. He was not a strong man, and he knew that he was not; still, he held the reins and the whip, which nobody could take away from him. Experience had not taught him that it is one thing to sit on the box and quite another thing to be able to drive. As for making his wife move in any other direction than that which it pleased her to take, he had never in his life managed to accomplish so much; but then, to be sure, he had not very often tried. He dreaded her political far more than her social indiscretions, and if she had been content to keep the latter within reasonable bounds, he would hardly have troubled himself to interfere with her; but, as he had truly told her, he had a great dislike to being made ridiculous, and he thought that she was making him ridiculous now. Moreover, he was en-

couraged to be arbitrary by the somewhat unexpected readiness with which she had accepted her dismissal from London. He looked forward, therefore, to a more or less prompt recognition of his authority, and in the meantime he cultivated the Dares, from whom he learnt many interesting particulars as to Madame Souravieff's manner of life in the country.

"I am almost ashamed to say so," Lady Dare declared, in the course of one of her conversations with him, "but I really cannot help thinking she must be privy to this shameful behaviour of Mr. Chetwode's. I doubt whether he would venture to pay his addresses to Cicely without Madame Souravieff's permission."

"I am quite sure that he would not, madame," replied the Count, with a slight twinkle in the corner of his eye.

"But how very dreadful that is! It shows such—such depravity! I can understand his wanting to get rid of her——"

"So can I!" interpolated the Count.

"But I cannot understand her wanting to get rid of him—and in such a way! It is unnatural—at all events, it is very unlike a woman—to be so cynical."

"It would not be very unlike Madame Souravieff,' said that lady's husband; "she is capable of a great deal in the way of eccentricity. And it is not proved that she wishes to get rid of Mr. Chetwode. Because a man is married, that is not a reason for bidding him adieu. On the contrary, marriage sometimes affords increased opportunities for friendship."

At this Lady Dare could only throw up her hands and gasp.

"Cicely must never be made the victim of such horrible machinations!" she ejaculated with fervour.

"Let us hope that she may be preserved from them," returned the Count, smiling.

He could form a tolerably shrewd conjecture as to his wife's aims and motives; he knew that she would like Mark Chetwode to become a rich man, and he

understood—what Lady Dare, who belonged to a different race, would never have understood—that a combination of love and ambition might lead her to act as she was reported to be acting. He did not, however, mention his letter to her, because his appeal for sympathy rested upon the ground that his wife had emancipated herself from his control: added to which, he thought it might be as well to wait for a reply before admitting that he had given an order. The reply came by return of post, and a very unsatisfactory sort of reply it was:

"MY DEAR BORIS,

"It must be confessed that, for a man who hates to be ridiculous, you have an unfortunate trick of making yourself so. Why all those sonorous phrases? You know that you have only to speak the word and I will at once join you at Wiesbaden, as a submissive wife should. Be good enough to let me know whether such is your wish, for I, too, am not precisely fond of being laughed at; and everybody will begin to laugh at me when it is known that I have once more been commanded to shift my quarters at a moment's notice. If I leave Upton Chetwode, I leave England. By the way, if you had thought proper to ask me the question, I should have told you that Mr. Chetwode (of whom you are so good as to say that you are not jealous) had let his house to me. I am afraid I cannot flatter myself that his remaining in the neighbourhood is due to any poor attractions that I can offer. Shall I let you into a secret? It is not improbable that we may hear before long of his betrothal to a lady who has large estates near his, and, if you will believe me, I am giving him all the assistance in my power.

"*Tout a vous,*

"OLGA."

The Count seized pen and paper, and promptly delivered the following counterblast. He was some-

what agitated at starting, but he cooled down as he went on:

"MADAME,

"I do not wish you to come to this place; in fact, I forbid you to do so. My state of health does not allow of my supporting the scenes with which you favour me whenever we meet. At the same time, I have to repeat my request that you will leave your present domicile. You may go to any other place in or out of England that may suit you. Permit me to observe that your *ruse* is sufficiently transparent to those who have the honour of being acquainted with you. I can well believe that you are anxious to marry Mr. Chetwode to a lady who owns large estates, and I have no difficulty in guessing at the state of things which you think likely to result from such a marriage. What is a little droll, is your capacity for shutting your eyes to dangers which should be obvious to a woman of your age. I have sources of information which I need not specify, but which lead me to believe that in this instance you have overshot your mark. Has it really not occurred to you that Miss Bligh (am I correct in stating the lady's name?) is young and beautiful, as well as rich, and that in spite of the poet, *On ne revient jamais a ses anciennes amours?*

"Deign, Madame, to accept the assurance of my sympathy and my highest consideration.

"BORIS SOURAVIEFF."

"I think," said the Count, rubbing his hands, "that that last paragraph will enrage her. It may not be true; but she will certainly think that it is true, and she will grind her teeth."

CHAPTER XXX.

A LITTLE LOSS OF TEMPER

It is not very easy for Western people to realize the ethical standard of men of Mark Chetwode's semi-Slavonic nature. Western people object very strongly to telling direct falsehoods, but can without much difficulty reconcile themselves to a *suggestio falsi* or a *suppressio veri*. Easterns, on the other hand, hold (perhaps more logically) that the harm of a lie is in the deceit, and that, if you are going to deceive your neighbour at all, you had better do it thoroughly. Judged according to the law of his own conscience (and, after all, what is the use of attempting to fix responsibility upon any other principle?) Mark was not habitually dishonourable. It gave him great discomfort to act in what he felt to be a dishonourable way, and nothing but considerations of paramount importance ever made him do so. He differed from most Englishmen, no doubt, in very many respects, but in none more so than in his ability to deceive others, when he gave his mind to it, and his inability to deceive himself. To play the part suggested to him by Madame Souravieff did not precisely coincide with his idea of what is becoming in a man of strict integrity, and to improve upon it by throwing dust in the eyes of Madame Souravieff herself jarred a little upon his sense of self-respect; yet, having once determined that a certain amount of dirt must be swallowed, he swallowed it without making ugly faces. If he made any false excuse for himself, it was only in so far as he still clung to the notion that the Bligh family had pilfered his land from him, and that he had a sort of moral right to get it back by any means that might offer.

He played his game with great coolness, tact, and

success. His fellow-conspirator was persuaded that the whole business went against the grain with him, and constantly scolded him for neglecting to make the most of his opportunities, while over Cicely he established by degrees a sort of ascendency which was not the less dangerous to her because she was absolutely unconscious of it. In his intercourse with her he did not again use such freedom of speech as he had permitted himself that afternoon on the beach; but indirectly he made her aware that he understood her feelings very well, and it seemed to her that he was the only person who did understand them. Archie, it was true, had been told in the plainest terms what they were; but Archie had apparently forgotten what he had been told. An unaccountable change had come over Archie, who now assumed a dictatorial tone when he did not take up an aggrieved one; and was evidently no longer satisfied with the humble position which he had at first accepted with so much eagerness and gratitude. In meditating upon it, Cicely called this change unaccountable; but of course it might be accounted for, and she had in reality, although not confessedly, adopted Mark's solution of what did not look like a very obscure enigma. If her pride was wounded, as doubtless it was, she concealed any mortification that she may have felt, and was very careful to lay no sort of restriction upon her betrothed or upon his manner of passing his time. If he wished to be released from his engagement, it was for him to take the initiative: she had no complaint to make and made none.

This may have been a very proper and dignified attitude to adopt; but naturally it widened a breach which had already been noticed with complacency and satisfaction by everybody in Cicely's small circle, with the solitary exception of Mr. Lowndes. The Rector, for his part, did not half like the turn matters were taking, and went so far as to confide his uneasiness to Miss

Skipwith, who said she really thought that when people showed themselves in their true colours, one should be thankful instead of grumbling.

"Their true colours!" echoed Mr. Lowndes impatiently. "And, pray, what do you suppose to be Archie's true colours? Haven't you been vowing and declaring all along that the estate was what he wanted? Now you seem to think that he is ready to sacrifice the estate and Cicely too for the sake of a lady who, I daresay, is as innocent of any desire to flirt with him as you are. How do you reconcile two such opposite views of the same individual?"

"I don't see anything irreconcilable about them," Miss Skipworth replied. "I think just what I have always thought about the young man; I think he is devoid of principle." And she nodded triumphantly at the Rector, as though inviting him to find a weak place in that succinct analysis if he could.

The Rector did not attempt to prove its absurdity; he only got up and shook himself and said:

"Oh, dear me, what nonsense!" And then: "A pretty mess you are going to make of it among you."

What perturbed him more than anything else was the increasing intimacy between Cicely and Mark Chetwode, which was being freely commented upon all over the parish. Even old Coppard had had the impudence to speak to him about it—Coppard, who had heard of Archie's wish to dispossess him of the cottage which he did not pay for, and who did not scruple to say:

"Furriner or no furriner, that there Mr. Chetwode is a deal more tender-hearted than some as should be his betters, being Britons and Christians by birth; and if Miss Cicely have found it out, why, so much the better, sir, in my opinion." He added, "No offence, sir," when the Rector frowned at him; but Mr. Lowndes rejoined:

"There is offence, Coppard; there is very great offence in your talking like that, and I beg you won't do it again."

Mr. Lowndes was much more afraid of Mark Chetwode than of Archie; for he knew that the latter was tender-hearted enough, so far as Cicely was concerned, and had no belief in his alleged enslavement by the Russian lady. Only he did think it rather odd that the young man should spend so much time at Upton Chetwode. Very likely he would have thought it still more odd if he could have overheard the kind of dialogue which took place there daily between Archie and his friendly adviser. The differences which are apt to arise between engaged persons always seem absurd to outsiders, who cannot for the life of them see why such a prodigious fuss should be made about misunderstandings which a few words could set straight.

But Madame Souravieff, whatever may have been her private convictions as to the probable effect of those few words, had no notion of allowing them to be spoken, and assured Archie that the present period of his career was critical in the extreme. "You must show that you are a man," she would say, in response to his somewhat querulous lamentations. "What signifies a little passing discomfort? This is not a question of a few weeks or months, but of your whole life. It is now or never with you."

"And if it should be never?" ejaculated the young man one day in despair. "I really don't think I so very much care. After all, the property is hers, not mine, and if she does mismanage it and make mistakes, the worst that can happen is that she will lose a few hundreds a year—which she won't miss."

"Ah, no, my friend," returned Madame Souravieff, smiling sadly, "that is not the worst that can happen, nor anything like the worst. The worst will be that she will learn to disregard you altogether—to treat you with contempt. It is an inevitable process! Don't you think that there are even some signs of it having already begun?"

Unfortunately for him he did think so: otherwise his love for Cicely and his miserable sense of alienation from her would in all probability have led him to defy far-seeing counsels. As it was, he found his sole solace in listening to these, in feebly combating them, and in dilating upon his woes by the hour; insomuch that when he went away, poor Madame Souravieff almost yawned her head off.

"*C'est assommant!*" she would explain pathetically to Mark. "Never since the world began was there such an imbecile as that young officer! Everybody who is in love is wearisome; but he! Oh, no words can express how wearisome he is! Frankly, I sometimes doubt whether it was worth while to undertake this exhausting labour even for you."

"I am sincerely grateful," the perfidious Mark would rejoin. "And I can feel for you. Remember that I am not exactly enjoying myself all this time. I, too, have to spend some long hours and half-hours."

Such assertions pleased Madame Souravieff, and restored her gaiety to her. The curious thing was that she believed them. Or possibly it was not so very curious; because most of us know from personal experience that a great deal is believed in for no better reason than that disbelief would be too painful to be faced.

The first letter which Madame Souravieff received from her husband was simply a source of amusement to her. She replied after the manner related, having perfect confidence in the efficacy of her threat, and troubled herself no more about the matter. But the second letter was another affair, and the Count would have been much gratified if he had seen her face while she perused it. One may shut one's eyes to the truth for almost any length of time, unless some unfeeling wretch thinks fit to put it into words, but when once that has happened, all is over. Facts are facts, whether stated or not; but the statement of them frequently

makes all the difference, and there were threads of grey in Madame Souravieff's abundant dark tresses. Gazing into her hand-mirror now, it seemed to her that they had lately become much more numerous. There were lines on her forehead, too, and something like a first indication of crows' feet at the corners of her eyes. Her heart faltered and sank as she contemplated herself. Beauty had not yet deserted her, but youth had, and in certain contests youth is invariably and inevitably the victor. In a sudden access of passion she struck her forehead sharply with her clenched hand.

"Idiot!" she exclaimed. And then: "Oh, why are men like that? We are not. I should love him if he were old and grey and bald—it would make no difference. But they never love us; they only love our faces."

Madame Souravieff may have been mistaken as regards our sex at large—let us hope that she was—but she was not at all mistaken with regard to Mark Chetwode, who had ceased to love her before ever he saw Cicely Bligh. The certainty that this was so came upon her, as that kind of certainty generally does, without proof or need of it; but if she wanted to make assurance doubly sure, proofs, or what seemed to her to be such, were shortly to be given her. For by-and-by, growing restless, she went out of doors and wandered along that footpath by which Morton Bligh had left the house on a memorable evening. And when she drew near the gate which divided Mark Chetwode's estate from that of his more wealthy neighbour, whom should she descry, standing one on either side of it, but the two persons of whom her thoughts were full.

They did not notice her, but continued their conversation, which had the appearance of being an interesting one. Mark was leaning over the gate and talking with more animation than usual; Cicely was listening to him with her eyes cast down, and a smile

upon her lips. How was Madame Souravieff to know that they were engaged upon a harmless discussion as to the respective lots of the Russian and English peasantry? She joined them, with anger and dismay in her heart and a countenance expressive of pleased surprise. They did not look in the least disconcerted; but Cicely, who of late had taken to treating her Russian friend with somewhat cold politeness, ceased to smile, and, after the interchange of a few commonplaces, observed that it was time for her to go home.

"You always run away from me now!" Madame Souravieff exclaimed, reproachfully. "Mr. Chetwode is more fortunate; when you are talking to him you are in no such hurry to find out what o'clock it is."

"Why did you say that?" Mark inquired, when Cicely had wished them both good-bye and had retired. "It was not in very good taste, was it?"

Madame Souravieff answered his question by another.

"Why have you deceived me?" she asked, fixing her eyes upon his. "Since you have fallen in love with that girl, why had you not the honesty to tell me so? Did you think that I should never find it out?"

Mark had not been quite so sanguine as that, but he had thought that the discovery might very well be deferred until such time as it should no longer be a danger to him. He did not, however, put forward that explanation of his conduct; he only remarked:

"Somebody has been suggesting absurdities to you, I suppose."

"Somebody has suggested the truth to me," she returned. "It is strange that the suggestion should be required, and still more strange that it should have come from the Count; but that does not much signify. The only thing that signifies is that I know the truth now." She told him about the letters which she had received from her husband, growing more excited while she spoke, and finally giving way to one of those

uncontrollable paroxysms of wrath which were so repellent to him.

"You will understand that I cannot remain any longer in your house," she declared in conclusion. "I shall obey the Count; I shall leave this place. Then you can marry Miss Bligh if she will have you, and you will not have to play the hypocrite every day, as you have done lately. That will be a relief to you, I should think."

He had very great difficulty in pacifying her. More than once in the course of the long disputation which ensued he was tempted to drop the mask and admit his treachery—if a change of feelings which no human being can help ought to be called by that name. But he did not trust Madame Souravieff sufficiently to run such risks. She was a powerful ally and would be a dangerous enemy: that she would remain neutral it was impossible to believe. And yet, with all the trouble that he gave himself, he achieved no more than a partial success. Her anger, indeed, cooled down, but she only half believed asseverations to which even his skill could hardly impart a ring of sincerity.

"Nevertheless, I think I will go away," she said at last. "I have done all that I can for you; you will manage what remains as well without me as with me. There is no need to go on protesting: what has happened now—or hasn't happened yet—is simply what was sure to happen from the first. It is nobody's fault, I daresay."

Mark was far from satisfied when he left her. Resignation, as he knew, was not one of her virtues, nor was consistency among her attributes. Because she seemed to be passive now, it did not at all follow that she would not be active to-morrow, and only a very little activity on her part was required to demolish the edifice he had so laboriously built up.

"What she wants," he mused, "is something to divert her thoughts. If only those wretched people in Bul-

garia would move! They are long past their time, as it is. I must remind her of that—and that it is lack of money that is keeping them back. Any way I am at her mercy, and must remain at her mercy for a long time to come. If I were not one of the most unlucky of mortals she would have wearied of me before now; if she hasn't, it is not because I haven't given her cause, Heaven knows!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

A REVELATION

To be at a woman's mercy is (with all due respect and admiration for the many virtues which women possess and we do not) an undesirable position for any man to occupy. No one will deny that women are often merciful; but few even of themselves would assert that they are wont to show mercy to rivals or traitors, and it is as well not to expect of them that they should. What Mark expected of Madame Souravieff was that she would make a full revelation to Cicely of his designs and hers, and be very sorry for it afterwards. After a fashion he understood her; but only after a fashion, recognizing the enthusiasm and impulsiveness of her temperament, without allowing her credit for a certain nobility which was likely to deter her from injuring him in the manner that he feared. He thought it an ominous sign that she had not asked him to return to dinner with her. While he disposed of the unappetizing meal which went by that name under the roof of Mr. Simpkins he pictured her sitting alone in the gloomy dining-room at Upton Chetwode and reviewing the situation. His representations had produced some effect upon her; but was there any chance of the effect being other than transi-

tory? He could imagine that she would at first laugh at herself for having been taken in by such obvious falsehoods, then fall to brooding over her wrongs, then work herself up into another fury, and finally resolve to be avenged upon him, cost what it might. Her habit was to strike while the iron was hot: it was far from improbable that she would drive over to the Priory immediately after breakfast the next morning, in order to take a step which could never be retraced.

The more Mark reflected upon this contingency the greater became his uneasiness and his desire to avert it. It might be averted by the exercise of personal influence, but then again it might be precipitated by the same means; for of course it would be a fatal mistake to appear too anxious. He hesitated, therefore, to yield to his inclination, which was to stroll up to Upton Chetwode in the course of the evening for a cigarette and a quiet chat with his tenant. There would be nothing out of the way in his doing what he had done so many times before; still, if she should suspect the object of his visit, he would be in a worse predicament than if he had remained away.

He had not yet made up his mind what he would do when he left his stuffy little lodgings and wandered through the steep street which led out of the village to the heights above it. It was a still, sultry night, and whether he went to Upton Chetwode or not, he felt that he could not remain within doors, haunted by the odours of Mr. Simpkins's bacon and cheese. As he slowly mounted the hill, and passed the confines of the property which was all that remained to him of his ancestral estates, the summer twilight was fading into darkness and the stars were beginning to show themselves, one by one, in a blue-black sky. He was by nature a melancholy man; his life had been spent chiefly in busy cities; he did not love the country, and the hush of the falling night oppressed him. On reaching the margin of one of his own woods he seated

himself upon a felled trunk, dropped his head upon his hand and pondered over the past, the present and the future. None of the three appeared satisfactory. The best half of life was over for him and had bequeathed him no pleasant memories; at an age when most men are supposed to be exempt from the risk of falling in love he had, for the first time, experienced a passion of such intensity that the mere idea of failure made him shudder; and when, somewhat against the grain, he forced himself to look forward, he saw difficulties and dangers without end.

"How much better it would be for me," he thought, "if I were as cold as Olga makes me out, and if I wanted nothing more now than I wanted when she and old Wingfield persuaded me to try conclusions with an unknown *traîneur de sabre!* I might have beaten the *traîneur de sabre!*—I may beat him yet, if I am not interfered with, because he isn't very hard to beat—but shall I ever obtain the only thing that I care for? Acres of land, and pockets full of money—at the best, I can hardly hope to get more than those, and they ought to satisfy my ambition. The unfortunate thing is that they don't."

This was a bad beginning; and matters looked darker still when he reflected that even the acres and the money were in serious jeopardy. He felt too depressed and unnerved to carry out his half-formed intention of facing Madame Souravieff again that night; so he remained motionless where he was, notwithstanding the darkness and the heavy dew, until the sound of a cautious footfall in the wood behind him attracted his attention. Somebody who evidently did not wish to attract attention was approaching him, and, had he been brought up in England, he would have guessed at once what that unseen individual was about. As it was, he only supposed that small portions of his timber were being appropriated, and did not much care if they were. But after a time a thick-set, heavily

built man emerged from the wood within a stone's-throw of him and stood for a moment, glancing right and left and listening. The pockets of this man's pilot coat bulged out from his person in a suspicious manner; also, to remove all doubt as to the occupation upon which he had just been engaged, there dangled from his left hand the lifeless body of a hare.

"Oho!" thought Mark; and with a sudden spring he threw himself upon the unsuspecting poacher, the collar of whose coat he gripped firmly. It was not the safest thing in the world to do; but Mark was no sufferer from timidity, and a guilty conscience, as we know, will make cowards of the most intrepid.

Mr. Coppard's conscience was not especially sensitive; nevertheless, he did not attempt to show fight, but dropped his hare and exclaimed in a lamentable voice:

"Lord love 'ee, sir, you ain't got no call to kill a man! I'm ready to go along quite quiet and be give into custody—if so be as you've the 'eart to do it, sir."

"I really see no reason why I shouldn't give you into custody," said Mark; "you appear to have been robbing me of my game. What punishment are you liable to for such offences?"

"Three months' 'ard labour, sir—or may be double," answered Coppard, with a sigh and a sad memory of previous convictions. "Come to that, I don't know but that it might run to penal servitude for a term o' years. 'Tis cruel 'ard, sir, upon a man with a 'ungry family."

"The pains and penalties of the law," observed Mark, calmly, "are always hard in individual cases. It is a comfort to think that no individual is compelled to lay himself open to them."

"What should you do yourself, sir, if your wife and children was in want, and you couldn't get no work?"

"Really I don't know; very likely I should rob

somebody. But that is no reason for allowing myself to be robbed. In addition to which, I don't believe that your wife and children are hungry, because that is a state of things which Miss Bligh would never permit."

"There's a many things, sir," answered Coppard, solemnly, "as Miss Cicely would not permit, if she knowed of 'em, and could prevent 'em. My being sent into penal servitude for one. She won't thank you for doin' o' that there job, you may depend."

But since Mark did not take that hint, and remained obdurate in spite of a very penitent and touching appeal for pity, it seemed as though the time had come to take a step which Coppard had contemplated for some time past. He said:

"Look 'ee here, sir; I could tell you somethin' as 'ud make it well worth your while to overlook what I done to-night. 'Tis well known in Abbotsport as you're sweet upon Miss Cicely. You'll excuse me puttin' things so plain; but a man in my desp'rate plight can't afford to be over nice, you see, sir. Well, sir, you give me your word as you'll take no proceedin's in this unfortnit business, and I'll 'elp you with her in a way as'll maybe astonish you."

"You are very obliging," answered Mark; "but I think I will hear what you have to say before I commit myself to any promises."

This excessive caution grieved Mr. Coppard, who observed that he was not one to deceive those who reposed trust in him. His own disposition, he gave it to be understood, was eminently trustful; nevertheless, he should feel it due to himself to keep his lips closed in default of a distinct undertaking that he should not be haled before the magistrates.

"What I got to say to you, sir," he added, by way of incentive, "is a thing as 'ud remove young Mr. Bligh out o' your way for hever and for hever; I don't mind tellin' you so much as that."

"Oh, something to young Mr. Bligh's disadvantage,

is it?" returned Mark. "Very well; say on. Probably your information will be of no value; but, on the other hand, it would not afford me any particular satisfaction to send you to prison. You may consider yourself safe from me."

The ground being thus cleared, Coppard proceeded to make his statement. He spent some time in preliminary remarks, because, being an Abbotsport man born and bred, he never did or said anything without due deliberation, and because self-respect required of him that he should explain how it was that he came to be acting in what a superficial observer might deem an unfriendly way to "the family." Any superficial observer who should jump to such a conclusion would, it appeared, be falling into a very great mistake.

"What I seen I kep' to myself, sir, and should have continued for to keep to myself, spite of any temptation as you could ha' hoffered to me, without I'd come to feel sartain sure as that there young gentleman was no proper 'usband for our Miss Cicely. Wanted to turn me out of 'ouse and 'ome, he did—and would ha' done it, too, only Miss Cicely she worn't agoin' to be dictated to by he, bless her!"

"I can fully enter into your sentiments with regard to him," said Mark. "He evidently deserves neither pity nor sympathy. Now perhaps you will tell me about what you saw him do."

Coppard's reply was very startling and very unexpected.

"I see him commit murder, sir—that's what I seen him do. And the murdered man was Mr. Morton Bligh, as met his death by misadventure, accordin' to the verdict of the crowner's jury. Same as made some unpleasant and uncalled-for observations about you, sir, you'll remember."

Mark's emotions were not easily stirred, but his heart began to beat fast now, and it was with a somewhat thick utterance that he said:

"This is a serious matter."

"So 'tis, sir," Coppard assented. "'Tis what you might call a 'angin' matter, though my 'ope is as it won't come to that. Anyway, what I seen I seen, and can depose to upon hoath, if required."

"You were placed upon your oath at the inquest, were you not?"

"I were, sir, and replied truthfully to all questions asked, as in dooty bound."

"Ah! I thought you were bound to tell not only the truth, but the whole truth. I am afraid you may get into trouble if you don't tell the whole truth now. Let us hear it, at all events."

"If you please, sir," answered Coppard.

His narrative, if somewhat diffuse, was circumstantial and bore the impress of veracity. It seemed that on the night of the fatal occurrence he had been, for purposes of his own, over which he passed lightly, in the vicinity of the spot where his auditor and he now were. He had witnessed the meeting between the two cousins, and although he had been too far off to hear what passed between them, he had judged by their raised voices that something like an altercation had immediately ensued. His impression had certainly been that Mr. Morton was not sober.

"Well, sir, arter a time they seemed to get more friendly like, and Mr. Harchibald he ketches 'old o' t'other by the harm and leads him off quite quiet. 'So,' thinks I, 'you've made it up, and a good job too!' For you see, sir, 'tis mere foolishness to quarrel with a man as don't know what he's about, and a thing I would never do myself, not if the provocation was ever so. Well, sir, I didn't look no more, but turned my back upon 'em, havin' other things to 'tend to, till I 'ears a sort o' scramblin' and scufflin' and runs out from the trees just in time to see Mr. Morton roll over the cliff and Mr. Harchibald on his 'ands and knees close to the hedge. 'Twas touch and go with

him, sir, you may depend, and the marvel to me is that we didn't have two deaths in the fam'ly 'stead o' one, that night. Mr. Harchibald, he seemed sort o' mazed like; and there he were, settin' on the grass, for the best part of a quarter of an hour, I should say, afore he jumps up and runs off towards the station as fast as he can go. Dessay you may have heard, sir, as he missed the train he said he meant to travel by that night and didn't leave till after midnight. A very orkard circumstance, by my way o' lookin' at it."

"And you never said a word about all this?"

"Not me, sir! Thinks I to myself, 'This may be misfortun' or it may be intention; 'tain't for me to speak positive as to one or t'other. But this I knows for sure: I ain't agoin' to break Miss Cicely's 'eart.' Nor yet I shouldn't ha' spoke as I done to-night if I'd thought as there was any fear o' that, sir."

"Oh, you don't think there is any fear of that," said Mark, absently.

"Else I should ha' kep' my mouth shut, sir, as I tell 'ee. But *you* know better nor I do what Miss Cicely's feelin's is."

There was a rather long pause, after which Mark said:

"I should recommend you to keep your mouth shut until I call upon you to open it again—and that, most likely, will be never. I daresay you have sense enough to see that you would do yourself no good by telling this story so late in the day. There is no reason at all why you should be believed, and there is more than one reason for looking upon your statement with suspicion. You are known to bear a grudge against the man whom you accuse, for instance."

"Upon my solemn Bible oath——" began Coppard.

"Oh, you needn't trouble about that; you have convinced me. The question for you to consider is what your unsupported evidence is worth; and in my opinion it isn't worth much, coming so long after the event.

You swear that you saw certain things; young Mr. Bligh swears that you couldn't have seen them, since they never occurred; impartial people have to decide which is telling the truth, and they naturally conclude that you are a malignant slanderer. At least that is my idea of what will happen. I am not sure whether malignant slander is as heinous an offence as killing hares; but I presume that you may be sent to prison for it."

Coppard scratched his head in perplexity.

"Then bain't you going to take advantage of this here, sir?" he asked.

"I haven't made up my mind yet what I shall do; I am only giving you reasons for silence. By your own account you wish to avoid distressing Miss Bligh if possible, and of course that is also my wish. It is quite upon the cards that I may decide to let her remain in ignorance of the whole affair."

"As *you* please, sir," answered Coppard, with a puzzled look; "'tis for you to say what shall be done. Though I can't think," he added, presently, "as you'll allow Miss Cicely to marry her brother's murderer."

"That, however, seems to have been what you were prepared to do until you found yourself in danger of being committed for trial upon a charge of poaching. Now that you have escaped that danger you had better be thankful and hold your tongue. If ever I want your evidence I shall call upon you for it; but if I don't call upon you, I shall expect you to know no more than you said you knew when you were examined at the inquest, Do you understand?"

Coppard replied that he did, pledged himself to secrecy and went off home, taking his booty with him, since he had not been ordered to relinquish it. Mr. Chetwode, he presumed, did not want to eat his own hares, and might have been puzzled to account for his possession of them if questioned by that inquisitive fellow Simpkins. As for Mark, he sat down again and

pondered for a while. It need scarcely be said that he had no idea of allowing the formidable weapon which had been placed in his hands to rust; but there were more ways than one of striking with it, and he had to consider which of them would be the best to adopt.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE SWORD FALLS

MARK was so far right in his forecast of the probable effect of solitude upon Madame Souravieff's mood, that she did in the course of the evening begin to feel incapable of passive submission to what she herself had declared to be her inevitable fate. Naturally enough she was more incensed against the innocent Cicely than against the faithless Mark. It was rather upon Cicely than upon Mark that she desired to be avenged, and of course nothing could be easier than to gratify such a desire to the full. All she had to do was to drive over to the Priory in the morning and make a more or less penitent confession of the plot upon which she had been engaged. That, it was true, would involve her in a certain amount of obloquy, and would likewise cut for ever the tie which still bound her to the man whom she loved. But what then? As a *pis aller*, one may be content to perish, like Samson, amid the ruins which destroy one's enemies.

But these were only visions; and even while she indulged in them she knew that she would never translate them into realities. After all, she loved the man; and if nothing else can be said for her, it must be said that her love for him had always been unselfish. From the first her one wish had been that he should be rich, powerful and happy; from the first she had recognized that, as matters stood, his happiness would hardly be

made compatible with her own! Was she to ruin him now because her heart was aching with an agony of jealousy for which it was still just possible that there might be no sufficient cause? That last thought might have made her stay her hand if nothing else did. Illusions die very hard, and hope, according to the ancients, never dies at all. Madame Souravieff thought she knew Mark Chetwode. Being a man, he was, like other men, capable of being fascinated by beauty; but he was even less capable than other men of remaining constant to such fascinations. Granted that this girl had made a conquest of him with her pretty face, it did not follow that she would be able to retain what she had won. "*On ne revient jamais a ses premières amours*," that malicious old Count had written; but the assertion, if true at all, was only true of the kind of love which pretty faces can excite; it did not apply to attachments grounded upon something more permanent than physical beauty.

Madame Souravieff, it will be perceived, was somewhat hard put to it to find sources of consolation for herself; still these, such as they were, sufficed in default of better ones to restrain her from the commission of a rash act of revenge, and although, when the next morning came, she could not resist ordering the carriage and having herself driven to the Priory, it was with no hostile intentions that she set forth. Probably, if she could have fathomed her own motives, which is always a difficult thing to do, she would have discovered that curiosity held the chief place amongst them. Did Cicely Bligh possess any attractions which could be accounted other than skin deep? Was she really in love with Mark or only out of patience with her cousin? Would there be much trouble about moulding and directing her after her marriage? These were questions to which Madame Souravieff was desirous of finding some answers, and doubtless she would have succeeded in doing so before long, had she not found

Mark himself seated in the drawing-room at the Priory when she was admitted. That was a rather provoking circumstance; still it was almost compensated for by the sight of his dismayed and interrogative face, and Madame Souravieff, who understood perfectly well what he was afraid of, was put into good humour when she perceived how deeply his habitual calm had been disturbed. It gave her spirits the little fillip of which they stood in need; she felt able to be brilliant, and certainly proved herself so.

"I have called at an inadmissible hour," she began; "but I am glad to see that somebody else has taken the same liberty without the same excuse. Mr. Chetwode can't plead, as I can, that this may be his last chance of seeing you."

And when Cicely had expressed the surprise and regret which such an announcement appeared to call for, she went on:

"Oh, I don't know for certain that I am going away; my movements are almost always uncertain, I am sorry to say. But it is quite possible that I may vanish in the course of a day or two, and I didn't want to vanish without wishing you good-bye."

She did not explain herself further, but began to talk in a very lively and amusing way about topics of general interest; insomuch that Mark could not imagine what she would be at, and Cicely, who did not like her, was compelled, not for the first time, to acknowledge the charm of her manner. And so, when Miss Skipwith came into the room, and the luncheon bell was heard, there was nothing for it but to give an invitation which was promptly accepted.

Archie joined the party in the dining-room. He looked dull and depressed, as indeed he generally did at this time, but Madame Souravieff soon made him talk. It was *apropos* of some remarks of hers about the German cavalry which were uttered for his benefit that Cicely said:

"I suppose we may at least claim to have the best cavalry in the world. I should say we had the best army all round, only one isn't allowed nowadays to assert that we surpass other nations in any single thing. I had a letter this morning from Jane Dare, who is at Wiesbaden, and who draws most unpatriotic comparisons between British and German soldiers."

"Oh, they are at Wiesbaden, then, your friends!" exclaimed Madame Souravieff, breaking into a peal of laughter. "That accounts for it! Now we know where the Count gets his trustworthy information from. Did Mr. Chetwode tell you about my husband's letters to me? But of course he would not; he is so discreet! Personally I am indiscretion itself; besides, it is unfair to defraud one's neighbours of a joke in this melancholy world. Would you believe that Count Souravieff has given me orders to leave this place instantly? And for such a reason! I came here, it seems, in order to be near Mr. Chetwode, of whom I am supposed to be much too fond. The Count considers this scandalous; and he knows that it is true, because he has been told of it upon excellent authority. And I, who thought that Sir George and Lady Dare were such nice, innocent, old people!"

She laughed heartily once more; but nobody joined in her laughter, and only Mark looked amused. Miss Skipwith drew down the corners of her mouth and assumed an air of severity: in her opinion the joke, if it was a joke, was one of very questionable taste. Archie frowned, and Cicely, not quite knowing what she was expected to say, held her peace. Madame Souravieff's attempt to relieve a portion of the melancholy of the world would certainly have fallen very flat if Mark had not hastened to respond. He, at least, had the advantage of knowing what he was expected to say, and he said it. Why such a candid statement of the circumstances had been made he did not know; but it was evidently intended that he should deride the sus-

picions of the Count—which thing he had no objection in the world to do.

"This comes of disregarding one's intuitions," he remarked, with a shrug of his shoulders. "When I took lodgings in Abbotsport I felt sure that all the good people round about would be scandalized. They were certain to say that I could not tear myself away from the society of my tenant; and the unfortunate part of it was that if they did say so they would not be very far wrong. As for Count Souravieff, he is like the absent—he is always wrong."

"And almost always absent," put in the Count's wife. "However, I am not convinced that he would be more often in the right if he were present; because he is not a very acute person. He might have been here the whole time and yet never discovered that it was not for my sake that Mr. Chetwode had taken up his abode above a grocer's shop."

Madame Souravieff glanced at her hostess as she smilingly delivered this shot, and gathered from Cicely's face that it had found its way home. Cicely was not in the least embarrassed; but she was decidedly annoyed, and showed that she was so by changing the subject emphatically. Madame Souravieff's whole tone was displeasing to her; nor did she altogether like Mark's jocular treatment of what it would surely have been more becoming in him to resent as a gross calumny.

As soon as luncheon was over Madame Souravieff took her leave. She had hoped for a short private conversation with Miss Bligh; but it was very certain that Mark would remain where he was the whole afternoon rather than allow her that privilege, so she said that she would try to look in again before her departure.

"That is, if I do depart. Ought I to depart, do you think? Mr. Chetwode refuses to give me any advice."

"Only because I am not a disinterested adviser," put in Mark. "How can an impoverished landlord who is threatened with the loss of his tenant be disinterested?"

"Oh, if you think that I had better stand my ground, pray don't let a mistaken feeling of delicacy prevent you from saying so," returned Madame Souravieff, with a mocking glance at him.

Then, as he did not reply, and as Cicely obstinately contemplated the carpet, she said good-bye to everybody, reminded Archie that he had promised to dine with her that evening and made a graceful exit.

Cicely, as has been said, was not best pleased either with Madame Souravieff or with Mark; and this, perhaps, may have made her feel more kindly disposed towards Archie than she had done of late.

"What are you going to do this afternoon?" she asked him. "Would you like to come for a ride with me?"

It was a long time since she had made any such suggestion to him, and there was something pathetic in the eagerness with which the young fellow jumped at it.

"Of course I should," he answered. "When shall we start?"

Mark could do no less than get up and say that he must be going; nor could Cicely very well do less than offer him a mount, if he cared to accompany her and her cousin. This offer, however, he declined, upon the plea that he was not dressed for riding; so she shook hands with him and left the room, saying that she would go and put on her habit.

As soon as she was gone, Mark asked Archie whether he was inclined to smoke a cigarette in the garden while Miss Bligh was getting ready.

"I rather want to speak to you, if you can spare me a few minutes," he added.

So poor Archie went with a light heart to hear his

doom. Tradition does not say whether the suspended sword ever fell upon the neck of the startled Damocles; but if he had nerve enough to finish his dinner, the chances are that he recovered his equanimity before rising from the table. Archie Bligh had of late grown accustomed to his scarcely more enviable position. The consciousness of the dreadful secret which must always exist between him and Cicely still weighed upon him, it is true; but he had almost ceased to dread detection, and he had no foreboding of what was coming when his companion said, in a grave voice:

"I heard something last night, Bligh, which I was very sorry to hear. I thought I ought to lose no time in telling you about it."

"People are always coming to tell me about unpleasant things," remarked Archie, with a slight laugh; "I can't make them understand that this property doesn't belong to me, and that I have no power to punish evil-doers or check abuses."

"What I was told last night did not refer to the property," answered Mark; "it referred to you. My first impulse was to keep what I had been told to myself; but I doubt whether I should serve you much by doing that, even if I could feel it to be justifiable; because my informant was a man whom you have unfortunately offended, and probably he is not at all to be relied upon. You know the old proverb: 'Murder will out!' It seems to be as true as most proverbs, and truer than some."

Archie had turned deadly white.

"What in the world are you talking about?" he managed to gasp out.

"I should think you can guess. To make a long story short, that old fisherman Coppard was an eye-witness of it all. He was in my woods—poaching, I suppose—and he saw you throw your cousin over the cliff. What more is there to be said? It would be absurd to attempt to console you or to pretend that

your life, so far as this place is concerned, is not at an end. All I can do is to advise you to escape while there is still time."

"But you are wrong!" exclaimed Archie; "what happened was not at all what you suppose. I never threw Morton over the cliff, it was he who tried to throw me over—in fact, he actually did push me over—and it was only in struggling to recover myself that I dragged him to the ground. Of course he was drunk. I don't know that he would have tried to murder me in cold blood; but he certainly did try then, and as nearly as possible succeeded. As for me, I didn't even know that he had fallen for a minute or two, and I don't know now how it occurred. That old villain Coppard may say what it suits him to say; but surely you must know that I am not a murderer!"

"I don't doubt your word for a single moment, my dear fellow," answered Mark compassionately; "but it would be no kindness to you to assert that others will not doubt it. How could you be so foolish as to run away?"

"I don't know," groaned Archie. "It was foolish, I dare say; but I thought, just as you say, that there would be people who would doubt my word, and I couldn't bring Morton to life again, and I had no time to think things over coolly. Anyhow, I won't run away again. If I am to be tried for my life I shall tell the truth, and if my story isn't believed I shall be hanged, I suppose. Death won't be very much worse than what I have been suffering all this summer."

"There are some other considerations which will occur to you when you have had more leisure for reflection," observed Mark, after remaining silent for a few seconds. "If I can be of any assistance to you—and I think that perhaps I can—I shall be very glad. I heard Madame Souravieff say that you were dining with her to-night; won't you come in and see me afterwards? Then we can talk matters over and decide what

is best to be done. Now you will have to go out for your ride, and you must try to look and speak as usual."

"That is utterly impossible!" exclaimed Archie, despairingly. "Look here, Chetwode, you must make some excuse for me to Cicely. Say anything you like; but I can't see her now. I'll turn up at your place this evening; though I don't know what you or anybody else can do for me."

He turned away as he spoke, hurried down one of the shrubberies and was soon out of sight.

Mark entered the house with a brave and preoccupied mien, which he did not discard when Cicely, in her riding-habit, met him at the foot of the staircase.

"I have come back to bring you a thousand apologies from your cousin, Miss Bligh," said he. "He remembered that he had some appointment or engagement—I didn't exactly gather what it was—and he couldn't stop to offer his excuses in person."

Cicely's eyes grew large and angry. She not unnaturally suspected that Madame Souravieff had something to do with this appointment or engagement, and she felt pretty sure that Mark suspected the same thing.

"Oh, very well," she answered; "I will tell them that we don't want the horses, then."

She knew that it would be unwise and undignified to say anything more; but Mark's serious and compassionate gaze so provoked her that she could not resist adding:

"You really need not look so sorry for me; the disappointment is not an overwhelming one."

"Was I looking sorry?" asked Mark, apparently rousing himself from a fit of abstraction. "If I was, I suppose it was because I was thinking of him, not of you. He is very much to be pitied."

The remark was an astute one, because it could be made to apply to various future and as yet uncertain

contingencies; but Cicely, of course, interpreted it as he had intended her to do.

"Do you mean because Madame Souravieff is going away?" she asked, tranquilly. "Yes, I am afraid he will miss her a good deal if she does go; but perhaps she won't. She didn't deprive us of all hope."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A COMPETENT ADVISER

ARCHIE hastened away, without noticing or caring whither he went. He passed through the shrubberies, crossed a corner of the park, and at length reached a summer-house commanding a view of Abbotsport and the bay, which had been erected in the days when summer-houses were the fashion, but which was now given over to spiders and earwigs. Here he sat down and tried to think. The first question he asked himself was whether his position was really as desperate as Mark Chetwode had made it out. Coppard, no doubt, was corruptible; Coppard would hardly have held his peace so long had he not expected to derive pecuniary advantage from silence. There was that possibility; and there was, besides, the hope that Cicely, when the truth should be revealed to her, would understand and accept it. Surely she would take the word of a gentleman rather than that of a notorious vagabond; surely, too, she would see the absurdity of imagining that her cousin had deliberately compassed her brother's death. Nevertheless, Archie could not flatter himself that either of these alternatives was likely to save him. From the payment of blackmail he shrank, having sense enough to be aware that that would be tantamount to an admission of guilt, and would probably result in nothing better than the putting off of the evil day; while as for

making a tardy confession to Cicely, he could not but perceive that his own folly had rendered such a course useless. She might accept his word, but she would not pardon his cowardice, nor would she consent to become his wife. He felt so sure of this that he dismissed the idea of confession from his mind almost immediately. What, then, remained? Nothing, that he could see, except to await the course of events passively. Even if he cared about saving his neck, it would be scarcely worth while to have recourse to flight; for suspected murderers can be arrested anywhere and everywhere in these days. Moreover, he had no great fear of being hanged. Hanging is not a dignified method of making one's exit from the world, but if he were to lose Cicely he would lose everything, and his life might as well end with his hopes.

That is the kind of thing which is often said and seldom or never meant. At Archie's age the physical clinging to life which we all have in a greater or less degree is very strong, and it is not likely that he would have surrendered himself to the police without making a dash for escape. That the very best thing he could do, under the circumstances, was to surrender himself to the police was an aspect of the case which did not present itself to him. His one longing was to retain such love as Cicely had been able to give him, and that longing seemed hopeless enough. "Your life, so far as this place is concerned, is at an end," Mark had told him. The words rang in his ears like a sentence from which there was no appeal.

He sat for a very long time where he was, and had arrived at no decision when at length he rose and wandered down towards Abbotsport. Chetwode, who had spoken of giving him assistance, might possibly be able to advise him, he thought. Chetwode was clever and cool-headed, and seemed disposed to be friendly. The lack of self-reliance which was the poor fellow's worst failing inclined him to clutch at any hand held

out to him, and if he had sometimes been a little jealous of Mark, that was a petty sentiment which had been dispelled by far more powerful emotions. At all events, it was essential that he should consult with Mark, since he was in Mark's power, and he was fully prepared to be guided by so impartial a counsellor. Remembering, however, that he would not be expected before evening, he did not proceed straight to Mr. Simpkins's, but strayed for some little distance along the beach and then, throwing himself down under an overhanging rock, apathetically watched the ebbing tide until long after sunset.

Late as he supposed it to be when he reached Mark's temporary abode, his arrival seemed early to that gentleman, who was finishing his dinner, and who greeted him with a surprised exclamation of:

"Already! You must have cut Madame Souravieff's hospitality very short. But my dear fellow, you are not dressed. Haven't you kept your engagement at all?"

"I forgot it," answered Archie; "and I shouldn't have gone if I had remembered it. I haven't been home since I saw you."

"Do you mean to say that you have had no dinner? Well, I can't offer you very tempting fare, but such as it is, it is at your service. One must eat, you know, whatever happens."

"Thank you, but I am not hungry," replied Archie, shortly.

"That has nothing to say to the question. You will have to use your brains to-night, and you cannot do that if your body is in a state of collapse. You must try to manage a mutton chop and a glass or two of champagne." And Mark got up and rang the bell.

Archie yielded, not thinking it worth while to dispute about trifles. As a matter of fact he did want food and felt better after it, though scarcely more cheerful. When he had finished, his host, who until then had refused to enter upon any discussion, said:

"Now, let us endeavour to be as sane and reasonable as we can. Have you thought at all this afternoon about what is to become of you?"

"I have been thinking about nothing else," answered Archie; "but thinking doesn't seem to mend matters much. I suppose what will become of me will be that I shall be tried for murder."

"Oh, I think not. The case, you see, stands thus: There is one witness who is prepared to swear that he saw a struggle between you and your cousin which ended in the way that we know of; he certainly couldn't swear that you provoked the struggle or that you meant it to end in that way. The unlucky circumstance, of course, is your having concealed what occurred; but there is no help for that now. Well, it so happens that that witness is to some extent in my power. Apparently he does not love you; but he has a dog-like sort of attachment for Miss Bligh, and altogether I am inclined to think that his silence might be secured. That is, if he knew that you had left the place never to return."

"But why should that be a necessary condition?" asked Archie, eagerly.

"I am afraid he would consider it so: these half-educated people are always obstinate. You must remember that he really believes you intended to kill Morton, and his belief would hardly be shaken by your denial."

"Then why didn't he say so before?"

"Because he wouldn't do anything that might cause unhappiness to Miss Bligh. He thought at first that it would make her happy to marry you; now he has changed his mind, and thinks, rightly or wrongly, that it would not. It isn't quite a case for bribery, you see; though I don't say that a bribe would be refused."

This chimed in well enough with what Archie recollected to have heard from Coppard's own lips; yet he could not think that he must submit to ruin and ship-

wreck because a drunken old fisherman disapproved of his marriage. "Of course," said he, "I would make it worth Coppard's while to hold his tongue. And don't you think that, if I had a talk with him, I could get him to understand that he is mistaken about Cicely?"

Mark did not reply, but shook his head, and taking his chin between his finger and thumb, looked gravely down at the carpet.

"I know what he means," Archie went on. "Cicely and I didn't agree as to his paying up the arrears of his rent, and there were one or two other points connected with the property about which we were not quite of one mind and which he may have heard of. But that isn't to say that there has been any real dispute between us. You can assure him of that, I should think, if he won't believe me."

"I fear that he wouldn't be convinced," answered Mark. "And even if he were! The truth is, my dear Bligh, that although I am very anxious to serve you to the best of my ability, I am still more anxious to spare your cousin, and it is for her sake, quite as much as for yours, that I want you to leave Abbotsport. I am afraid you haven't yet realized that under no circumstances could you become her husband now. I tell you frankly that, if nobody else stepped in to stop your marriage, I should feel bound to do so. One can't allow any woman to marry in ignorance a man who has killed her brother; though he may have done it, as I have no doubt that you did, in mere self-defence. I am quite sure that if you were situated as I am you would look at the matter just as I do."

Unhappily this was only too true: and the faint spark of hope which had been kindled in Archie's heart died away.

"You are right," he said, in a low voice. "If I had made a clean breast of it at the time it might have been different; but it is too late now. All that I can do for

her is to save her from the humiliation of ever hearing the truth. If only I could do that without running away! She will think I have deserted her."

"Yes," agreed Mark; "that is what she will think. It is best that she should think so." He added, after a moment (and probably he was quite sincere), "I never felt more sorry for any man in my life than I do for you, Bligh; but I can suggest nothing except flight to you; there is nothing else for it. Perhaps it sounds heartless to say so; nevertheless it is true that you are young enough to begin a fresh career elsewhere."

"That will be so easy, won't it?" returned Archie, with a bitter laugh. "All one has to do is to forget everything and everybody. I suppose you mean that I had better settle in Australia under a feigned name?"

"I don't see why you should change your name. You might settle in Australia, if you thought that desirable, but when I was thinking to-day what I could do for you it struck me that you might prefer the chance of a little active service in Europe. I think I could very likely procure that chance for you."

Archie pricked up his ears.

"I wish you would!" he exclaimed. "It is just the one thing—the only thing—that I should care to live for."

"So I imagined. Well, I can't make any promise, because it is very doubtful whether war will break out this year; but I can bring you into relations with people who will be only too glad to avail themselves of your services at the first opportunity. These people are conspirators. I don't know whether you object to that."

"Why the deuce should I object?" returned Archie. "All I ask for is a pretty good hope of getting shot. I'm willing to conspire against anybody, except the Queen."

Mark smiled.

"You will be asked to conspire against the so-called Prince of Bulgaria," he said, "or at least to help in

carrying out the designs of those who are conspiring against him. He is not a very interesting personage; he has no sort of business to be where he is, and I am assured that the majority of his people would be glad to be rid of him. However that may be, his dethronement would be probably followed by a Russian occupation, and then the fire would be started. If fighting is what you want, you would be likely to get plenty of it, supposing that you could be at Sofia in a quasi-military capacity at the right moment. Only you will have to swear blind obedience to your employers, otherwise they will have nothing to do with you. I myself have done the same thing; and if they call upon me I shall have to go, little as I care about such matters nowadays."

"What do you mean by blind obedience?" inquired Archie. "I suppose they won't order me to assassinate anybody, will they?"

"Upon my word I don't know," answered Mark; "I made very few inquiries when I took my oath of allegiance. I believe that one is bound to carry out any order that one may receive; but I presume that, in selecting assassins, they generally make choice of some otherwise useless person. You, as an ex-cavalry officer, would not be at all useless, and it seems unlikely that they would waste you in that manner. I wouldn't answer for them, though, and I am sure that they would have no scruple about putting an end to any person whom they wanted out of the way."

Archie was silent for a few minutes. The offer tendered to him was scarcely a seductive one, yet it bore enough of the character of a forlorn hope to fascinate him in his present desperate state.

"If I agree, should I be sent straight out to Bulgaria?" he asked, presently.

"No; I think you would have to go first to Athens, and then either to Salonica or Constantinople; but you will understand that I am not at liberty to give you

any particulars until you become one of us. You would receive your instructions in London."

"Well, I'll chance it," said Archie, with a sigh. "When ought I to start?"

"If you ask me, I should recommend you to start early to-morrow morning. Not that things are ripe in the East—for I believe they are not—but because, if I were you, I wouldn't see Miss Bligh again. I don't think you could very well see her without betraying yourself, and I know that, for her sake, you wouldn't wish to do that."

"But do you mean to say that you would simply bolt, without packing up your things or saying a word to anybody, and never be heard of again?"

"No; I should pack up everything that I wanted and start by the first train, leaving a message to say that I had been called away suddenly and would write from London."

"And would you write from London?"

"Yes—a few lines. You will have to tell your cousin that she is released from her engagement, and that, for reasons which you cannot explain, you are about to quit the country. It won't be a pleasant letter to write, but you can make it a short one. The shorter the better."

Mark's quiet, uncompromising way of stating the case did not fail to impress the weaker man, who, after that, accepted the instructions given to him without resistance or demur. He was told where he was to go and what he was to do on reaching London; he was cautioned against seeing anybody except the servants when he returned to the Priory; he was even advised as to the terms in which he should let the servants know that he would require a dog-cart to take him to the station in the morning. It all sounded very sensible and practical, and Chetwode, if not particularly sympathetic, was doubtless doing the best in his power to befriend one who could not

benefit much by any friendly offices. He sat with Mark until the night was far advanced, so as to give Cicely and Miss Skipwith plenty of time to retire to bed; he heard a good deal about the state of feeling in the Danubian Principalities, and gathered that, although his companion was no enthusiastic believer in Panslavism, the adherents of that cause were numerous, and powerful enough to disturb the peace of Europe.

"At least," Mark said, in conclusion, "I can promise you that there will be a big fight some day, and all the information that I have had points to its taking place soon. How it is to be begun I don't know; but in all probability a rising or mutiny in Bulgaria will be the first step. Now I will wish you good-bye, Bligh, and if you won't think I mean to be ironical, I will wish you good luck too. We may meet again under more exciting circumstances—who knows? But if we don't, you may at any rate trust me to keep your secret."

Archie thanked him, without any mental reservation, and went away. He was too wretched and downhearted to suspect treachery; nor did he see how Chetwode could have acted otherwise than as he had done. For his own part, a stray bullet was all that he asked of Fortune, and that modest aspiration was pretty sure to be fulfilled, he thought. No hitch occurred in the programme which had been sketched out for him. It was between twelve and one o'clock when he arrived at the Priory and gave the requisite order to a sleepy footman. During the night he packed up a few of his belongings and slept a little, and long before Cicely was stirring the next day he had taken his last farewell of her and of home.

It may be that he had capitulated too readily; but no one can give himself qualities which are foreign to his nature. All his life long Archie had been subject to the influence of those into whose companionship he

had been thrown, and it would be as absurd to blame him for taking Mark Chetwode's advice as to blame a blind man for allowing himself to be led into a ditch.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MARK'S OPPORTUNITY

THAT Providence ever intervenes in human affairs was a doctrine which Mark Chetwode held to be a mere superstition; for he considered that all evidence and experience go to prove the contrary. Since, however, most people find it necessary to believe that their destinies are ruled by somebody or something beyond their control, he, who had at one period of his life been a great gambler, had learnt to believe firmly in runs of good and ill luck. Of the former he had hitherto had very much less than his fair share; but now the tide seemed to have turned, and it behoved him to take full advantage of it before the ebb should set in once more. On the morning after his long interview with Archie Bligh he was able to tell himself that he had not been remiss in this plain duty; nor was his self-approval disturbed by any pangs of conscience. Good luck for one man very often, if not always, implies bad luck for another. This is to be regretted; still it is not the fault of the lucky one that the nature of things is what it is, and Mark had really done all he could to facilitate the retreat of his discomfited rival. Even had he had no personal interest in the matter, it would have been out of the question to let Archie marry the sister of the man whose death he had caused.

It now remained to deal with Madame Souravieff, who was still formidable, or at any rate might become so when she pleased. For more reasons than one Mark

was now extremely anxious that she should leave the neighbourhood; but he doubted whether she would do that, and of course it would be fatal to let her guess his wishes. Upon the whole, it seemed advisable to walk up to Upton Chetwode and try to find out which way the wind blew. Accordingly, he set out as soon as he had finished his breakfast, stopping at the post-office to despatch a telegram which puzzled and vexed the young woman to whom he handed it. Why should people want to send telegrams which, read forwards or backwards or in any other way that ingenuity can suggest, form nothing but sheer nonsense? That sort of thing shows a nasty secretive disposition, and justifies the suspicion that those who resort to it are no better than they should be.

But Mark, having thus prepared a fitting reception in London for Archie, went cheerfully on his way, without any pity for baffled local curiosity, and presently whom should he meet but Mr. Coppard, going about his daily avocations, which were various, and at this time consisted in the hawking of fish upon a barrow. Coppard touched his cap when beckoned to, and said, with an air of much innocence, that he supposed Mr. Chetwode didn't happen to want a beautiful fresh turbot.

Mr. Chetwode did not happen to be in want of such a thing, but he wanted Coppard to be so good as to give him his attention for a few minutes, if he was not in a hurry.

"My time is yours, sir," replied Coppard, urbanely.

"Well," said Mark, "I won't detain you long; but I think you had better be told that young Mr. Bligh left for London this morning, and that he will probably never return. It seemed to me best to let him know what I had heard from you, and, finding that your story was substantially accurate, I was compelled to insist upon his releasing Miss Bligh from her engagement. This he has done or will do; so that the matter may now very well be allowed to rest. Understand

this, however: you will get no hush-money either from him or from me, and——"

"Sir," interrupted Coppard, drawing himself up, "I haven't asked for such, nor yet don't mean to do. If I'd ha' wanted to be bought hoff, 'twould ha' been easy for me to go to the young gentleman afore now. 'Twas for Miss Cicely's sake as I kep' quiet, and 'twas for Miss Cicely's sake as I told you what I did."

"Oh, I thought it was because you were afraid of being sent to prison. But never mind. Whatever your reasons for speaking may have been, I think I can give you quite as good a one for not speaking again—namely, that you may put yourself in a most uncomfortable predicament if you do. Do you know what an accessory after the fact is? I was not sure myself until last night, when I looked him up in a law-book and found that he is one who, having cognizance of the commission of a felony, 'receives, relieves, comforts or assists' the felon—in other words, who helps him to evade justice. And do you know, Mr. Coppard, that in murder cases accessories after the fact may be punished by penal servitude for life?"

Coppard quaked visibly. He did not know much about the laws of his country, but such personal experience as he had had of their operation had not been reassuring.

"You wouldn't never go for to do it, sir!" he exclaimed. "You wouldn't be the ruin of a man as done you no hinjury, without it was them leverets, which you'll allow as I give you information amountin' to up'ards o' their value, sir."

"Oh, *I* shall not ruin you, of course," answered Mark. "I only thought it right to caution you against ruining yourself. Good-morning."

That seemed to dispose pretty satisfactorily of Coppard; but a much less off-hand method of treatment was required for the next person whose discretion had, if possible, to be secured, and when Mark was shown

into the presence of Madame Souravieff he had assumed a worried and anxious air which that lady not unnaturally misinterpreted.

"Oh, no, I haven't," said she, laughing in answer to what she imagined to be his unuttered question. "It wasn't for that purpose that I went to see Miss Bligh yesterday, and your sitting me out was quite unnecessary. It would have been unnecessary in any case; because you must surely see that if I wanted to stab you in the back you couldn't possibly prevent me."

Mark made a slight gesture expressive of patient resignation.

"Is it," he asked, "very bad taste to remind you that I undertook this business at your suggestion and with a good deal of reluctance? I suppose you must have wanted me to succeed when there was so little probability of my succeeding, and now that success seems to be within my reach you apparently want me to fail. It is unfortunate; because I can hardly draw back with credit after going so far. Still, if you wish me to draw back, pray say so. Now, as always, I am at your orders."

"I have no orders to give you," Madame Souravieff declared; "there are certain things which cannot be ordered. I don't think I shall give you any more assistance, though. You seem quite able to stand alone now, and I confess that the plaints of the lover who is going to be jilted have become unspeakably wearisome to me. That reminds me that I kept dinner waiting nearly an hour for him last night, and that he neither appeared nor sent an excuse. Do you think that such conduct would justify me in dropping his acquaintance?"

"Perhaps it would," answered Mark; "but I doubt whether you will be troubled with him again so long as you are at Abbotsport. Last night he came, in a great state of agitation and excitement, to tell me that he had made up his mind to leave the place; and I presume that he has already gone."

"To leave the place!" echoed Madame Souravieff, opening her eyes. "Does that mean that he admits his defeat, and throws over his cousin to save himself from being thrown over? I should never have supposed that he had so much spirit in him."

"Possibly he is more despairing than spirited," said Mark; "possibly also he is more willing to throw his cousin over now than he was a short time ago. But I daresay you know more about that than I do."

The insinuation was not lost upon Madame Souravieff, nor was it altogether displeasing to her.

"Nonsense!" she returned, laughing. "He looks upon me as a middle-aged woman—and the worst of it is that he is right, because that is just what I am. Well, I congratulate you; you have nothing to do now but to step into the place which he has been so obliging as to vacate."

Mark looked doubtful.

"You think so?" said he. "I am not sure that he wouldn't have done me a greater service by remaining in his place rather longer. However, he has seen fit to take to his heels, and as he did not honour me by expressing the slightest fear of my becoming his successor, I can only assume that the succession question doesn't interest him as much as it ought. That of itself is an excellent reason for Miss Bligh's beginning to find him interesting."

"No," answered Madame Souravieff, decisively. "She will be very angry with him, but she certainly will not regret him; and after a time she will be glad that he took matters into his own hands, instead of forcing her to speak first. I had almost decided to go away to-morrow, but now I think I will wait a few days longer and see what happens."

"Oh, a few days! Nothing will happen in a few days."

"Well, if nothing happens, I might even linger a few weeks. Probably I shall be able to temporize with Boris for that length of time."

"I sincerely hope you will," answered Mark, who sincerely hoped the contrary.

It was impossible to suggest any motive for departure to Madame Souravieff; and, that being so, he wisely took the line of imploring her not to desert him. He was an admirable actor, and although his acting did not entirely deceive her, it confirmed that forlorn hope of hers that his fancy for the English girl would pass away and leave him in what, after all, was perhaps his normal condition. Their conversation insensibly became more friendly and less circumspect; each of them grew less defiant of the other; and before their interview closed they had reached the point of discussing what was to be done with the revenues of the Bligh estates.

Meanwhile Cicely had received with no small astonishment the news of her cousin's departure and his somewhat curt message to the effect that he would write to her from London. But for his strange behaviour in absenting himself on the previous afternoon she would perhaps have believed that he had been called away upon some matter of business, and would have thought no more about it; as it was she could not avoid the conviction that Madame Souravieff was answerable for all this. Pending an explanation, she held her judgment in suspense; that is to say, that, although highly incensed, she abstained throughout a rather long day from formulating the suspicions which were in her mind, and snubbed Miss Skipwith without mercy when that lady took the liberty of saying that Archie's conduct amounted to nothing short of an outrage. But on the following morning the post brought her a letter so extraordinary, and at the same time so unequivocal, that she had to read it over three times before she could believe the evidence of her own senses. It was in these terms (and without giving any address) that Archie had thought fit to take leave of the girl whom he loved:

"My dear Cicely,

"I don't know how to write to you, but it matters very little what I say or don't say. You won't understand, and I can never tell you, why I must give you up. But so it is. You are free from this moment. I am going to leave England, and I daresay you will never even hear of me again. The only consolation I have is that I know this will not make you nearly as miserable as it makes me. You told me from the first that you did not love me, but perhaps I hardly understood what you meant at the time. Latterly I have understood better, and I have sometimes doubted whether I could have made you happy—though I should have tried. There are a great many more things that I should like to write; but I dare not write them, lest you should think that I am not in earnest about what I have written already. If you set me down as a madman or a scoundrel, it must be so—I can't help it. All I ask you to believe is that I shouldn't have taken this step if there had been any possibility of avoiding it. Good-bye, Cicely, and God bless you!

"Ever your loving cousin,

"Archie Bligh."

The poor fellow had taken a good deal of trouble over this most unfortunately worded missive. Debarred as he was from even hinting at the true cause of his flight, he had despaired of making out anything approaching to a case for himself, and had felt that the only use of his writing to Cicely at all was to convince her how irrevocable was his renunciation of her. He had thought of half a dozen improbable ways in which she might account for that renunciation, but it had not occurred to him that she would adopt so preposterous a theory as that which any man or woman dwelling within five miles of Abbotsport could have told him that she was sure to adopt. To Cicely his letter appeared to afford absolutely conclusive proof of the soundness

of that theory, and it must be confessed that it made her quite as angry as Madame Souravieff had anticipated that it would. Anger was, indeed, the only emotion, except astonishment, to which she was moved by it. She neither believed that Archie was "miserable"—that was the sort of assertion that he was bound to make under such circumstances—nor felt any pity for one who, as she supposed, had been entrapped by a designing and unscrupulous woman. To some extent he might have been a victim, but it was evident that he had not been a very unwilling one.

And now it was necessary to face the distasteful duty of announcing that she had been jilted to her relations and friends, beginning with Miss Skipwith. This, like other distasteful duties, did not gain in attractiveness by being contemplated; so that Cicely determined to take the first plunge without further delay. She marched straight into the little morning-room, where Miss Skipwith was generally to be found, busily engaged in doing nothing, and said:

"Aunt Susan, I have come to tell you that my engagement is at an end. I have just had a letter from Archie, who says that for some time past he has doubted whether we could have been happy together; and as I myself have felt the same doubt, it is certainly better that we should part. He thinks of going abroad; so that I hope there will not be much awkwardness or discomfort about it."

Miss Skipwith was overjoyed; but at the same time she felt that it would be contrary to all tradition and propriety to let so serious a matter as the rupture of an engagement pass without some show of consternation. She therefore threw up her hands, and ejaculated:

"Oh, my dear child, how very dreadful!"

"It may be," answered Cicely, calmly, "but I doubt whether you think so, Aunt Susan. You never liked the engagement, you know, and you wished me to break it off."

"Yes, my dear, but I never expressed a wish that *he* should break it off; that is a very different thing. I must say that his behaviour is altogether inexplicable to me. What *can* have been his motive?"

"Oh, the usual and quite sufficient one—incompatibility of temper," answered Cicely. "We have found out our mistake in time: let us be thankful for that and say no more about it."

And she refused to make any response to the questions and surmises of her aunt, who thought her rather hard and unfeeling.

The truth of the matter was that the girl was beginning to feel very sore. She had loved Archie in one sense, if not in another; she had firmly believed in his love for her; and to be rejected is agreeable to nobody. But it was impossible to open her heart to her aunt, who would never understand her, so presently she slipped out of the house, and, sitting down in a shady corner of the garden, felt miserably sad and lonely. All her life she had been more lonely than most girls; though she had scarcely been aware of the fact. While her father had lived she had had a friend who was always kind, always sympathetic and able to enter into all her joys and sorrows without saying much about them, but now he had been taken from her and there was nobody—absolutely nobody—left. The most self-reliant of mortals must feel the need of companionship sometimes, and Cicely felt it bitterly now. The stars in their courses were fighting for Mark Chetwode, who was well enough acquainted with the weaknesses and necessities of human nature to know that his opportunity was at hand.

CHAPTER XXXV.

SYMPATHY

THE nineteenth century has its drawbacks; but it also has its conspicuous advantages, amongst which ought surely to be numbered the almost universal use of tobacco. How in the world did our ancestors manage to get on without it? How do women manage to get through life and preserve their serenity (but, to be sure, they don't always) without it now? For reasons which must be obvious to everybody, one hesitates to advocate the adoption of smoking among young and pretty women; yet it seems certain that upon them no less than upon us nicotine would exercise a beneficent influence as a sedative to the nerves and an incentive to broad and philosophic views of the accidents of existence. If Cicely's meditations in the garden had been accompanied and soothed by a cigarette, she would perhaps have recognized that it is human to be inconstant; that loves and friendships come and go as the sun rises and sets, and the years pass on; that very little of what happens to us is of any consequence; that it is hardly worth while to be angry with anybody for being what Nature made him, and other facts equally indisputable and consolatory. But either because she was denied the blessing conferred upon mankind by Sir Walter Raleigh, or by reason of her youth, or on account of some inherent defect in her individuality, she was unable to resign herself with a shrug of her shoulders to the state of things in the present and the prospect of the future. Both struck her as eminently discouraging, dispiriting, and of a nature to undermine all belief in the race to which we belong. Whatever might be said or thought of Archie, nobody, surely, would have supposed him to be other than a straight-

forward, honourable man; if he was not to be trusted, who was? She thought over the list of her acquaintance—a tolerably long one—and in not one of them, except Bobby Dare, could she feel absolutely convinced that there was no guile. But poor, honest Bobby was far away, fighting the battle of humanity against the slave-trade, so that for all practical purposes he had to be dismissed as non-existent. Aunt Susan, of course, was honest enough according to her lights, but Aunt Susan's lights were a little dim, and her vision was so obscured by prejudices of different kinds that it was almost necessary to hold her at arm's length.

During luncheon, accordingly, Miss Skipwith was held at arm's length, and was proportionately aggrieved. She felt constrained to say:

"I know very well, my dear, that you are keeping something back from me. I am not inquisitive and I do not ask for your confidence, still you might remember that I have always loved you as if you were my own child, though you may never have looked upon me as any substitute for your mother."

Cicely could only declare that she was concealing nothing and had said all that there was to say. She was sorry to appear unkind; but there was no help for it. As a confidante, Aunt Susan really would not do. As soon as possible she made her escape, and, returning to her old post in the garden, gave herself up once more to moralizing of a sad and cynical character.

Some very enviable people are able to derive much placid enjoyment from absolute idleness; but Cicely was not one of these. Like a great many dogs, and the generality of horses and all servants, she went to the bad when she had no work to do, and she had fretted herself into a condition of utter disgust with everything and everybody by the time that the butler came ambling across the grass to inquire whether she would see Mr. Chetwode, who was at the front door. It was

only after some seconds of deliberation that she replied:

"Yes. Ask him to come out here, please."

She was not sure that she particularly wanted to see Mark for his own sake, but she did rather particularly want to hear whether he could throw any light upon the origin of recent events, and she thought it by no means improbable that he had called for the purpose of so doing.

Mark's visit, it need scarcely be said, had been prompted by that kindly intention. Presently he stepped out of the sunlight into the shade, holding his hat in one hand and extending the other, while upon his features was discernible just so much regret and anxiety as could be expressed without risk of impertinence. Cicely saw at a glance that he was aware of what had occurred, and she did not care to fence with him.

"I suppose you know," she began almost immediately, "that Archie has gone away?"

He made a sign of assent with some apparent reluctance, and allowed a short space of time to elapse before he said:

"Yes, I knew that he meant to go. In fact, he came to see me the night before last and told me that he did."

"And did he tell you why he was going?" asked Cicely; for she had made up her mind that if Archie had not done so, she would.

Mark had seated himself in a wicker chair close to hers, and was gravely contemplating a bed of scarlet verbenas at his feet.

"Well, no," he answered; "I can't say that he exactly did that; but from what he did tell me, I understood that he was going away for a long time."

"He is not coming back at all," said Cicely, quietly. "As our engagement has been broken off, he cannot stay here for the present, and he speaks as if he would never stay here again."

LIBRARY OF THE

Mark glanced quickly up.

"I am not surprised," he said, "and it would be useless affectation to pretend that I am sorry. I once took the liberty of expressing my opinion about your engagement to him at the risk of giving great offence, and what has happened since then hasn't changed my opinion. I can't help being glad that you are free—though, if it makes you unhappy, I am very sorry for that."

"It does make me unhappy," Cicely confessed. "I have no doubt you were right in thinking that our engagement could not end happily; I have thought the same thing myself of late. Still I can't feel satisfied with the way in which it has come to an end."

"Oh, no," agreed Mark, shaking his head; "you can't, of course, feel satisfied with that."

"You see," Cicely went on—for notwithstanding her recent pessimistic cogitations, she believed Mark to be a true friend, and although he said so *little*, there was something in his manner which seemed to show that he could fully enter into her feelings—"you see, it isn't as though Archie were no relation of mine. In a great many ways he was more like my brother than my cousin, and I thought I knew him thoroughly, and now I find that I didn't know him at all. The Archie whom I knew would never have acted as he has done," she added, rather pathetically.

Mark still remained silent. Cicely gathered from his expression that he hesitated to put his thoughts into words, so she said:

"I don't at all mind talking about it. If you are any better informed than I am, you would do me a kindness by telling me what you have heard."

"I don't know how far your information goes, Miss Bligh," answered Mark; "mine—that is, all that I had from your cousin—simply amounts to this. He came to my lodgings in a rather excited state to wish me good-bye——"

"On his way from Madame Souravieff's?" interrupted Cicely.

"Had he been there? It was late when he arrived and he did not stay long. He said he wanted to wish me good-bye, as we should probably never meet again, and then he made some confused statement about his leaving England for good. I did not press him to explain himself, because, to tell the truth, I hardly needed an explanation. I quite understood all that he didn't say."

"Did you? I don't think I do," observed Cicely, after a short pause. "It seems to me a little incomprehensible, in spite of what you told me that afternoon on the beach. I don't mean that Archie's dissatisfaction is incomprehensible, for I suppose that all men naturally wish to be masters in the house where they have to live; but it wasn't only because he was dissatisfied that he went away."

"Oh, he had a more powerful reason, no doubt. In one way that reason is quite as incomprehensible to me as it can be to you; but in another way it isn't. I have seen the same kind of thing occur so often before that I can't regard it as an extraordinary phenomenon, though I admit that it is not easily accounted for. Perhaps the truth is that our weak point is our vanity, and that any woman who is not positively ugly and is clever enough to flatter us in the right way can make fools of us. I speak with all the humility of one who has been made a fool of in his day," added Mark, with a slight laugh.

"And by the same person?"

"By the same person. When I first met Madame Souravieff I was a thoroughly miserable man—even more miserable in some respects than I am now. I had wasted my life in the society of people whose only object was to amuse themselves and who never succeeded; I had wasted my small fortune in gambling and my time in a monotonous round of dancing, dining,

and flirting. I was utterly sick of it all. I myself was just as selfish and stupid and bored as my so-called friends, only I was a shade worse off than they were because I was less resigned. As a matter of course I fell, without a struggle to save myself, under the influence of a woman who lived in the world, yet seemed to have ideas and ideals and enthusiasms which the world, in a social sense, usually laughs at. But perhaps this fragment of autobiography doesn't interest you?"

"It interests me very much," said Cicely. "Please go on."

"Well, I became Madame Souravieff's most ardent admirer. I won't say that I fell in love with her, because I have since seen reason to believe that I did not know what love was at that time, but at any rate I thought myself in love with her. Perhaps I did not altogether agree with her political opinions; but that did not prevent me from placing myself unreservedly at her disposition and joining the secret societies which she asked me to join, and believing in her sincerity, if I didn't believe very much in the triumph of her schemes. As far as that goes, I believe in her sincerity still. She really loves Russia, and really thinks that Russia has a sacred mission to drive the infidel out of Europe. Whether she and her friends will help Russia by stirring up premature disturbances in Servia and Bulgaria is, of course, another question. What captivated me, and what may perhaps have captivated your cousin, was her courage and a sort of sanguine cheeriness which never deserted her, and, above all, the conviction which she was pleased to profess that nobody could serve her and her cause as well as I could."

All this was perfectly true; so that there was no need for any skill on Mark's part in order to lend an air of verisimilitude to a narrative which did not fail to impress his hearer.

"Yes," she said, "but you are half a Russian and

have lived in Russia. Archie is an Englishman, if ever there was one."

Mark drew down the corners of his mouth and jerked up his shoulders.

"Under certain circumstances," he remarked, "one might be persuaded to consider oneself a Chinaman."

"Then if Archie has been what you call captivated, it is by Madame Souravieff herself, not by her political ideas."

"I can't tell; she has many methods, but always one dominant aim, and it would not surprise me in the least if the next news that you had from your cousin reached you from Bulgaria. It is probable that she will very soon forget all about him now. She has scored a signal victory, and that ought to satisfy her."

"She is a very bad woman!" exclaimed Cicely, suddenly.

"Not so very, I think. Her impression, you may be sure, is that she has done you a service, and in all truth and honesty I can't but agree with her."

"And what about Archie? You seem as ready to forget him as you say that she is."

"I own that I haven't much compassion for him. I may be unduly partial to myself, but my case strikes me as a very different one from his. Madame Souravieff found me virtually alone in the world; she might have turned me round her little finger if she had been much less pretty and pleasant and kind than she was, and I really don't think that I should have been very much to blame. But what is there to be said for your cousin, who had everything that a man could wish or hope for, and deliberately threw it all away because he was silly enough to believe that a woman ten years older than himself appreciated him more than you did? I can forgive him, because his loss is your gain, but as for pitying him, I should have to see things in quite another light before I could do that."

Cicely herself did not find it easy to pity Archie or to plead extenuating circumstances on his behalf. All that she could say was:

"It may be quite true that Madame Souravieff appreciated him more than I did. I was very fond of him and I am so still; but I never cared for him in the way that he professed to care for me, and I never pretended that I did."

"Ah!" ejaculated Mark, drawing a long breath.

"There is no harm in my admitting that, now that it is all over," Cicely went on. "I suppose I ought not to have accepted him at all, but he wished it, and my father wished it. There was so much to be said in favour of the marriage and so very little against it."

Mark nodded.

"At any rate," he observed, presently, "you must be glad to feel that you have nothing to reproach yourself with, and, if you will pardon my saying so, I am very glad to feel that your future is now at your own disposition again. You were going to dispose of it after a fashion which would have made you wretched: it is something to know that that danger is past, whatever other dangers may be coming."

Another danger was doubtless at hand; but Cicely did not perceive it, nor was her companion imprudent enough to give her any premature warning of its approach. For the present he was content to play the part of a sincere and sympathizing friend; in which character she was very willing to welcome him. He left her decidedly more cheerful than he had found her, and before he went away he ventured to impress upon her the advisability of bringing no accusation, direct or indirect, against Madame Souravieff.

"She would only deny all knowledge of the fugitive," he observed; "and I am afraid that perhaps she would exult over you a little."

This caution, which had the effect of making Cicely laugh for the first time, was, it need hardly be said,

superfluous; but Mark—as indeed had been shown by his demeanour throughout the interview—was a very cautious man.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AN ATHLETIC MEETING

CICELY was not a little surprised by the calmness with which Archie's desertion of her was generally acquiesced in. Being quite unaware that for some time past everybody had been saying to everybody else that this kind of thing really couldn't go on much longer, you know, she gave her neighbours credit for more tact and good feeling than they possessed, and was grateful to them for sparing her the condolences which she had dreaded. She made no secret of the fact that her engagement was broken off. That was an announcement which must of necessity be made sooner or later, and might just as well be made at once. Besides, Aunt Susan, who had suddenly remembered that she owed a great many visits, would not have found it possible to hold her peace, even if she had been requested to do so.

Those were days of much quiet enjoyment for Miss Skipwith. The old lady drove about from house to house, telling her tale in low, confidential tones, and claiming—as indeed no one could dispute her right to do—that from the very outset she had had a bad opinion of "Mr. Archibald Bligh." That the very last thing she had ever expected him to do was to renounce the brilliant prospect for which she believed him to have schemed was a matter of detail upon which she laid no stress. Unprincipled people can only act in an unprincipled way, and whether their lack of principle may cause them to drift north, south, east or west is evidently a mere question of the set of the prevailing

wind. Now all Miss Skipwith's friends agreed with her in thinking that this misguided young man would be found to have shaped his course towards the south-eastward, and they were very sure that somebody else, not less unprincipled, would shortly set sail for a similar destination. It had leaked out that Madame Souravieff was upon the point of quitting Upton Chetwode, and for some reason or other the gossips had become imbued with the conviction that Archie was to await her arrival in Paris. This was very sad and very bad; still things might doubtless have been worse. They would have been a great deal worse, for example, if the disgraceful affair had occurred after Cicely's marriage instead of before it, and one could not be thankful enough that the poor girl had escaped so terrible a danger. The good people of the vicinity had, therefore, excellent reasons for refraining from condoling with her, in addition to one which they would not willingly have admitted—namely, that they were all a little frightened of the young heiress.

A solitary exception was found in the person of Mr. Lowndes, who neither feared anybody (unless, perhaps, his wife at times) nor was disposed to believe in statements which struck him as well-nigh incredible. He went over to the Priory and had a long talk with Cicely, whom, however, he did not succeed in persuading that Archie was the victim of some misunderstanding or intrigue.

"But, my dear girl," he exclaimed, somewhat impatiently, "you must know as well as I do that the poor lad is incapable of such conduct! If anybody were to tell you that I had been seen drunk in the pulpit, would you believe it?"

"I should have to believe it if I saw it with my own eyes," answered Cicely; and to put an end to further discussion, she produced her cousin's letter, which certainly appeared to be convincing, yet failed to convince the stubborn Rector.

Mr. Lowndes, therefore, wrote a kindly letter to Archie's club in London, but received no reply; and so in a surprisingly short space of time the luckless fellow was dismissed from the minds of those amongst whom he had seemed destined to spend the remainder of his life. It is true that he had never taken any great pains to make himself popular.

Mark Chetwode did not think he would promote his own interests by becoming a frequent visitor to the Priory; but he managed without much exercise of ingenuity to meet Miss Bligh every day; and what proved these encounters to be quite unpremeditated was that they took place in the most improbable spots. Once it was in a back-alley of Abbotsport; once it was in the pine-wood adjoining the Upton Chetwode Park; once it was in a deserted timber-yard outside the village, whither she had betaken herself for a little quiet meditation, and where he assuredly could not have dreamt of coming across her—unless, indeed, he had been watching her movements from round the corner, which, as a matter of fact, was precisely what he had been doing. She began to look forward to seeing this grave, reserved friend, who may possibly have realized what an extremely interesting quality reserve is. He always implied a good deal more than he said, the advantage of that method being that implications are usually understood by the person to whom they are addressed, but that neither you nor that person need accept any responsibility for them. It pleased Cicely to ignore the humble adoration at which Mark hinted; but she was very well aware that he admired her and saw no reason why he should not, a great many people having done that without any bad consequences to themselves. She was accustomed to the admiration of men, and his was not the less agreeable to her because it had been so long withheld.

What she was quite unconscious of was that she was falling into the habit of asking for Mark's advice

and taking it. To be sure, he was careful to make his advice chime in with what he believed to be her inclinations; but, whether intentionally or not, he was gradually assuming a certain air of authority in giving his opinion which she did not dislike.

"Oh, I think you ought to be there," he said decisively one afternoon, when she told him that she had doubts about attending the annual athletic meeting which her father had instituted for the benefit of the Abbotsport young men, and at which she had always hitherto given away the prizes; "you will disappoint them if you don't show yourself, and nobody will take your appearance as an intimation that you wish to go into society again."

"That is what I was not quite sure about," answered Cicely, hesitatingly. "It has grown to be quite a large affair now, and the whole county comes to it."

"But who will present the prizes if you do not? Miss Skipwith?"

Cicely laughed.

"No; I'm afraid that would hardly do," she answered. "Besides, nothing would induce Aunt Susan to make herself so conspicuous. I suppose I had better go through it; though it will be a little bit of an ordeal."

"You are one of those people who never shirk ordeals," observed Mark, meditatively; and he thought to himself that it would be no bad plan to let the county see him standing at Miss Bligh's elbow on the occasion of the prize-giving. Public opinion is not of much value, still it is always more or less desirable that one's position should be recognized.

Thus it came to pass that when the A.A.C. (Abbotsport Athletic Club) held its summer meeting, Cicely, dressed in the deepest of mourning, took her accustomed place in the front of the covered platform which had been erected for the accommodation of distinguished patrons. The performances, if not quite up to the Lillie Bridge standard, were creditable enough, con-

sidering that not even the influence of Mr. Bligh had ever availed to persuade an Abbotsport lad of the necessity of going into training; and the weather was fine, and the squires and squiresses from far and near had driven over to smile benignly upon the competitors. Among the last to arrive were the Dares, whom Cicely had not expected to see, and who greeted her with much warmth. They had only reached home on the previous evening, they explained, and as soon as Sir George and Lady Dare had turned away to make civil speeches to other neighbours, Miss Jane came to the front.

Miss Jane's manner was unwontedly cordial and confidential. She said:

"My dear Cicely, I am so glad you are here. I was half afraid that you wouldn't be, and I have such a number of things to tell you about. Wouldn't you like to take a turn round the ground?"

Cicely had no objection. She had lived for so many weeks in comparative solitude that she was bewildered and distressed by the hum of voices round her, and the incessant stretching forth of hands which she was obliged to shake.

"Well, first of all," began Miss Dare, when they had passed outside the circle of spectators, "I must tell you that Bobby is coming home and may arrive any day. It seems that the wounds which he received in that affair where he behaved so splendidly were really more serious than was represented. At any rate, they haven't healed properly, and he has been ordered out of that hot climate on sick-leave."

Cicely said she was glad that Bobby was coming back to England, but sorry for the cause of his return.

"Oh," said Miss Dare, "we are not at all alarmed about him; a little care and nursing will soon put him right, we hope; it was on his account that we hurried home from Wiesbaden, instead of going on to Switzerland, as usual, for my father to recruit himself after

the baths. And whom do you think that we made acquaintance with at Wiesbaden? No less a person than Count Souravieff, the husband of that detestable woman!"

"So I heard from the detestable woman herself," remarked Cicely. "At least she told us that she had had a letter from her husband, and, as he seemed to know all that was taking place here, we presumed that he must have met you."

"You don't mean to say that she mentioned her husband to you? What impudence! It appears that she had completely deceived the poor old man as to her whereabouts, and he was in a great state of mind when he heard that she was actually living in Mr. Chetwode's house. Mamma is so very sorry now that she called upon her."

"I don't think Lady Dare need regret it on Mr. Chetwode's account," said Cicely. "He has only a friendly regard for his tenant—if he has that."

"Well, not on Mr. Chetwode's account *only*, of course," answered Miss Dare, with a tentative side-glance at her companion; "but—but really she seems to be such a dreadful woman altogether. Cicely dear, I wonder whether you will mind my saying how very sorry I was to hear of the way in which your engagement to your cousin had ended."

"Not in the least," replied Cicely; "it makes a pleasant change. Up to now, nobody, except Mr. Lowndes, has expressed anything but satisfaction that it had come to an end."

Miss Dare pointed out that what had moved her to sorrow was the manner in which the rupture had occurred, not the rupture itself, "which I couldn't honestly pretend to regret. And are you still upon speaking terms with Madame Souravieff?" she inquired, with some curiosity.

"I haven't seen her for some little time," answered

Cicely; "but I am on speaking terms with her, as far as I know. Why should I not be?"

Miss Dare, being a matter-of-fact person, was about to reply to this question when she was checked.

"Of course I understand what you mean," Cicely said; "but I don't know and don't want to know whether there is any truth in what you seem to have heard. Archie and I are not going to be married, because we agreed that we should disagree as husband and wife; that is reason enough for our having parted, I suppose. Now I think we ought to be going back to the stand."

It was indeed about time to do so, for now the last race had been run and the last attempt to accomplish the high jump had failed, and Mr. Lowndes was clearing his voice in preparation for the speech in which he proposed to announce that Miss Bligh had very kindly consented to hand the prizes to those who had so well earned them. Nobody could be better qualified than Cicely to discharge this duty. Being, as she was, personally acquainted with the winners, she knew exactly what to say to them and was able to dismiss each in turn with a satisfied grin upon his face. Mark Chetwode, who had arrived somewhat late, had taken up his station close behind her and handed her the cups, clocks, and other useful and ornamental objects as they were required.

Some people, amongst whom was Miss Dare, thought this a rather forward proceeding on Mr. Chetwode's part, and exchanged whispered observations about him which were neither kind nor complimentary; but their criticisms were diverted into another channel when a certain showy victoria, which everybody recognized, was seen advancing at a brisk pace across the grass outside the enclosure.

"Surely," exclaimed everybody, "she will never have the face!" But secretly everybody hoped that she

would; because, however much one may deprecate brazen assurance in the abstract, there is no denying that a flagrant exhibition of it affords a certain degree of pleasurable excitement to spectators.

Of that pleasure and excitement Madame Souravieff had no intention of depriving the assembled company. Strictly speaking, she was scarcely entitled to demand admittance to a stand which was supposed to be reserved for subscribers; but her claim was not disputed. The two rural constables who guarded the entrance saluted her respectfully as she swept past them, and presently she appeared in the midst of the gathering of notables, all eyes being turned upon her with glances of mingled curiosity and hostility. Lady Dare's bow was quite a work of art in its way. She managed it by straightening her shoulders, throwing her head back and then very slightly bending her neck, at the same time sticking her chin out and lowering her eyelids. In large cities, where people perhaps have not time to study niceties of demeanour, such appalling salutations are not common; but in the provinces they may be seen from time to time, and the effect of them is enough to crush all heart out of the most audacious. If Madame Souravieff was not crushed, it was because she was too preoccupied to notice anything more than that some dowdy old woman or other was bowing to her.

She made her way at once to the front of the platform, where Mark was standing beside the red-covered table, and the moment that Mark saw her face he knew that she was in one of her most dangerous moods. What had occurred to irritate her he had no idea, but very evident it was that she was irritated—which was as much as to say that she was reckless. She pushed past him, taking no heed of the detaining hand which he stretched out, and with a smiling face, but somewhat harsh voice, greeted Cicely, who was a little startled, having had no warning of her approach.

"How do you do, Miss Bligh? I could not deny

myself the pleasure of assisting at this idyllic fête. You are bestowing rewards, I see, upon the successful gymnasts. And have you no reward for your clever assistant, Mr. Chetwode? He is modest; he keeps himself in the background; yet I know nobody who can perform more remarkable gymnastics than he. I mean moral gymnastics; but those are perhaps the most difficult, after all."

Cicely looked surprised, but only said rather coldly:

"How do you do, Madame Souravieff?"

That was, no doubt, the best answer that she could make, and the expectant magnates, who had eagerly watched the encounter, without hearing what passed between the two ladies, exchanged approving glances, feeling that their representative had so far had the best of it.

The next minute Cicely had to present a beaker to a blushing young giant who held an enormous pair of hands to receive it, so that Madame Souravieff was prevented from continuing her remarks. Before she could commit herself further Mark stepped up to her, and, with his usual impassive countenance, said in Russian:

"Do you wish to appear perfectly ridiculous in the presence of a number of people who are longing for an excuse to laugh at you? If not, perhaps you will tell me what is the matter before you make a scene."

She replied in a low, fierce tone, and in the same language:

"You are trying to play your game without me; you have told me lies. That was not wise of you, my friend."

"It might have been even less wise to tell you the truth," observed Mark, coolly. "At any rate you had better give me a chance of hearing your explanation and offering mine. I will drive back with you when this business is over if you will allow me. And if you came here for the purpose of denouncing me to Miss

Bligh, I may remind you that that can be done quite as well to-morrow as to-day."

"I think," said Madame Souravieff, "that you would be rightly served if I were to do it now."

"Possibly; though I do not know why. The effect would be dramatic, I daresay; only it might also be a trifle grotesque, might it not?"

Madame Souravieff sighed and yielded. She had quite meant to be dramatic; but she did not particularly wish to be grotesque, and Mark's composure chilled her. So she sat down in a chair which he obligingly pushed forward, and the proceedings terminated with a tameness which was rather disappointing to some of the lookers-on.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE MEMORY OF THE PAST

THE explanation which Mark Chetwode had suggested of Archie's sudden disappearance had not been altogether disagreeable to Madame Souravieff, although she had not, of course, believed in it. Her own impression was that the young man had gone off in a fit of irritation, and would probably return ere long in a penitent frame of mind. Meanwhile her vanity was flattered by what had appeared very like a slight exhibition of jealousy on Mark's part. But on the day of the Abbotsford athletic meeting she received a letter from an intimate friend in London which caused her to view the situation in a very different light.

"What strange people you and Mr. Chetwode are!" this friend wrote, "and what strange recruits you manage to get hold of! Frankly, my dear, what has this poor, innocent, stupid young Englishman done to you? That is a question which you will not answer, I suppose, though you know I am as discreet as I am

inquisitive. But at least do not tell me that he is animated by ardour for the great cause, or that you have persuaded him to adopt ideas which certain politicians in this country have gravely accepted from you. No, no; that really will not do! I grant you the politicians, who are ignorant and self-complacent enough to believe in anything; but a simple soldier, who relies upon the evidence of his own senses and could never be made to understand how black can be white—*allons donc!* And you take no half-measures with him either; he has gone all lengths, I understand. What surprises me is that you should have been able to induce the persons whom we know of to accept him. It is true that you are better acquainted with those persons and their requirements than I am; for I, as you are aware, do not propose to go all lengths. I only saw this Mr. Bligh for a few minutes—a nice young man, with a countenance of the deepest despair and an air of being tired of life. Well, if he wishes somebody to relieve him of that burden, one must confess that he has been fortunate in falling in with the right sort of friends."

These observations infuriated Madame Souravieff all the more because she was no better informed than her correspondent as to their exact significance. It was a sore point with her that, for all her plotting and scheming, she had never been fully trusted by those who made use of her talents. The mysterious persons alluded to were really mysterious to her; she held no direct communication with them, she was only allowed occasional glimpses of their plans, and it had galled her that her *protégé* Mark Chetwode was admitted into inner circles from which she herself was excluded. And a noble use he seemed to have made of his privileges! Naturally, what most excited Madame Souvarieff's wrath was to find that she had been tricked, and that Mark was so desperately eager to get rid of his rival; but in addition to that, she really felt a glow of indigna-

tion at the means which he had adopted to secure his end. One may be a conspirator without being an assassin.

The upshot of some stormy self-communings was that she resolved to present herself at the athletic sports in the manner described. And it was with the full intention of making a scene that she had herself driven thither. What did she care for the amazement or consternation of the assembled company? She was going away from the place; she would never see these people again; they might say and think just what they pleased about her. Only Mark should be taught that it was dangerous to play a double game with the woman whom he had pretended to love.

As has been seen, she abandoned her spirited programme because her heart failed her at the last moment; but she was determined to have it out with Mark, and no sooner had he seated himself beside her in her victoria than she began:

"Why did you not tell me that it was you who sent young Bligh away? Why did you not tell me what you had done with him? Was it because you knew that I should never consent to his being employed in such a manner? Was it because you knew that, whatever I may be, I am not a cold-blooded murderess?"

"Before I answer your questions, Olga," replied Mark, composedly, "you will perhaps allow me to put one to you. In what manner do you imagine that Bligh is to be employed?"

"Oh, as to that, there is no need to waste words. I received information from London to-day—you might have guessed that I should—and you cannot deceive me. The man has got his death-warrant."

"Indeed? If so, I can only say that I am quite unaware of it. There is a chance, but not a very strong one, I should think, that he will take part in some desultory fighting before long, and of course he may be shot; but that can scarcely be regarded as equivalent to a death-warrant. If you have heard of

his being threatened with any greater danger, you know more than I do."

Now Madame Souravieff, having no certain knowledge of what was implied in "going all lengths," was a little afraid that she would be laughed at if she gave expression to her conjectures. Therefore she only said:

"Why should he be expected to run the risk of being shot in such a cause? What has he to do with Bulgaria?"

Mark shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, nothing. I sometimes ask myself what I have to do with Bulgaria; yet I suppose it is upon the cards that I may be shot some day in that interesting country. To be sure, I know very well for whose sake it was that I took certain engagements upon me; and I am not convinced that Bligh's case differs very greatly from my own."

"You cannot put me off by talking what you and I know is nonsense. You have sent him out there because you love that girl, and because you are afraid of him and hope that he will be killed."

"Oh, very well; if you choose to say so! Only I don't know how you suppose that I can have prevailed upon him to be so accommodating."

"That is what you will have to explain to me; but you cannot deny that this is your doing. And why did you conceal the truth from me?"

"For the simple reason that he made me promise not to reveal it. I told you that he came to me in a very excited and incoherent condition. He said he was going away for good and all, and he expressed a wish to see some active service: so I gave him what help I could by writing introductions for him to our friends in London. Of course I was bound to respect his secret, since he made a point of it; but, as you observed just now, it was obvious that you would very soon hear what had become of him."

"I do not believe," said Madame Souravieff, speaking very slowly, "that you are telling me the truth even now."

Mark raised his eyes and scrutinized her steadily for a moment. How would it do to let her hear the real cause of Archie's flight? Had he felt that it was at all possible to trust her, he would have done so; but she was so capricious and so apt to lose her self-control that she might at any moment blurt out what she knew, and—oddly enough, as many people would think—it was for Archie's sake that he decided to hold his peace. That unlucky fellow was already at the mercy of two persons; it would be rather unfair to add such a third to the number. So he only said:

"I am afraid I cannot give you faith. Perhaps, if you wish to obtain it, your best plan would be to write to Bligh himself. I have the address of his London club."

"I must try to believe you," said Madame Souravieff, sighing. "Evidently I should get no further information by writing, or you would not advise me to write." And then, as if reasoning with herself, she added, "It is possible, after all, that the girl may have goaded him to desperation."

"Yes; the girl—or somebody else," said Mark. "At any rate, he is disposed of, and that is what you wished. At least, so I imagined."

"It isn't always so easy to know what one wishes for," replied Madame Souravieff, with a sigh "I wonder what you wish for! Or rather, I don't wonder, because I know. Well, so be it! Every dog has his day, and I have had mine. Will you stay and dine with me to-night?"

"I shall be only too delighted."

"I am not sure about that; you must be getting rather tired of dining with me by now, I suspect. But be consoled; this shall be the very last time. Everything in life is uncertain, but I suppose I may say

with certainty that in another forty-eight hours I shall have taken a final farewell of Abbotsport."

She did not appear to be looking at Mark; but very probably she could see his face out of the corner of her eye, and it was doubtless wise of him to assume an air of deep concern.

"Must you go?" he asked.

"I don't know that I am absolutely compelled to go; but Boris insists, and my own sense of expediency backs him up. I have done what I wanted to do here—or what I thought wanted to do; the climax is not likely to be interesting, nor can I flatter myself that I shall be very much missed. How glad you will be when you hear that I have reached Paris and that you can count upon carrying this business through in your own quiet, methodical way, without danger of being put to confusion at any moment by a woman who thinks she has claims upon you!"

Mark thought it best to make a slight grimace and remain silent. He would indeed be glad to know that the English Channel was between him and Madame Souravieff; but in her present unsettled state of mind there would be risk in protesting too loudly that such was not the case.

During the remainder of the drive she said very little, and immediately on reaching the house she went upstairs to dress for dinner. When she reappeared, her guest, who had for some time been awaiting her, with a newspaper which he was not reading in his hand, gave an involuntary exclamation of astonishment. She had arrayed herself with a splendour which seemed wholly inappropriate to the occasion. Her dress, the body and train of which were of pale pink brocade, while the front was of silk, covered with exquisite embroidery of a somewhat darker shade, must have cost a small fortune; a necklace of enormous diamonds encircled her white throat, and in her dark hair blazed a tiara of the same jewels. She stood

looking down upon him for a moment with an ironical smile upon her lips; and then all of a sudden he understood. Years before—it seemed a great many years—she had worn an exactly similar costume at a ball at the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, and on that evening he had ventured to tell her, for the first time in plain words, that he loved her. How well he remembered it!—all the better because until that moment he had so completely forgotten it. But now the whole scene came back to him; the tall erect figure of the late Czar: the crowd of officials in their showy uniforms; the jewels, the multitude of lights, the heated air, and the heavy scent of the flowers. He saw himself too, tired, disconsolate, thoroughly disenchanted with existence. And this woman, who at the very least had given him a fresh interest in life—well, perhaps he had been mistaken; but certainly he had held very exalted ideas about her at the time. For although she had listened to him without anger or surprise, and although she had not shrunk from admitting that she cared for him, she had in a certain sense held him at arm's length. Later in their acquaintance she had become more reckless in her speech; but neither then nor at any subsequent period had he been guilty of any disrespect towards her, save that of repeating that he loved her. And she had said what he himself had felt, that we cannot help loving and ought not to be blamed for it; but that when we are condemned to unhappiness it is better to try and make others happy than to sit still and groan. And thus it was that she had persuaded him to labour for the happiness of the Slavonic races. Perhaps he had never cared very much about the Slavonic races; certainly he had soon grown weary of the labours which they were said to require of his hands, and afterwards he had wearied of other things and people into the bargain. But at this moment a vivid flash of memory made his heart ache and brought an unwonted ring of tenderness into his voice as he said:

"Ah, you haven't forgotten, then!"

"I do not forget easily," Madame Souravieff answered, "it is you who need reminders."

She was pleased, however, that the reminder had proved so effectual, and presently, when they moved into the dining-room, she essayed, not without a measure of success, to employ those attractions which had captivated Mark and many another man besides in days gone by. Wholly successful she could not be, and she knew that she could not. She knew it, that is to say, in much the same sense as she knew that her hair was turning grey and that she had lost her youth beyond recall. Patent facts cannot be disputed; yet when such facts relate to oneself, one is apt to admit them with a mental reservation, and if there had been no reservation in Madame Souravieff's mind, she would hardly have astonished her guest and her servants by donning that pink gown and those diamonds. She could talk very brightly and cleverly; she had little tricks of speech and manner which were peculiar to her, and she was looking extremely handsome. Of course it was all in vain; but there was just a possibility of its not being in vain, and under certain circumstances one has to make the best of possibilities.

As for Mark, he had to make the best of a situation which was not free from embarrassment and peril. Partly from a feeling of remorse, partly from motives of policy, he met her halfway, dwelling regretfully upon episodes of the past, and ejaculating, with a melancholy smile: "*Ah, l'heureux temps quand nous etions si malheureux!*" And later in the evening, by which time Madame's Souravieff's determination to quit Abbotsport at once had been shown to be irrevocable, he ventured upon less ambiguous language than that.

"It will be impossible for me to live in this house after you have gone away!" he exclaimed. "I have hated it from the first, and I shall hate it a thousand times more when everything about it will remind me

that you were here once and will never be here again."

"I was thinking of asking you to accept the few odds and ends that I brought down from London with me to brighten the rooms up," she said, smiling; "but if you feel in that way about it, perhaps I had better have them removed. However, you will not be called upon to live here very long, and after you have migrated to the Priory you won't often revisit the halls of your ancestors, I daresay. And then you will at last have regained possession of the lands of your ancestors. Doesn't that thought console you?"

"I had forgotten all about them," answered Mark, rather incautiously.

The moment the words were out of his mouth he saw what a stupid blunder he had made; for was not this recovery of the Chetwode property supposed to be the one motive of his courtship? But Madame Souravieff did not appear to notice his slip of the tongue, and he hastened to add:

"Consolations are always discoverable, and one is driven to discover them when one's fate is decided; but just now I can remember nothing except that this is our last evening together, Olga."

"Oh, it need not be quite so bad as that," she returned with a laugh; "one is permitted to spend a quiet evening with one's friends occasionally, even when they are married. Or do you think that will not be permitted in your case?"

He shook his head gravely.

"I can't tell. All I can see is that I am at the end of a period. And I am a little old for opening fresh periods."

Madame Souravieff gazed intently at his impenetrable face. She did not trust him; yet—it was certain that he had loved her once.

"I wonder," she sighed, "what would happen to us both if I were free at this moment."

"Don't you know?" he asked, reproachfully.

"I thought I did; but perhaps I was mistaken. Of course it would be for you to decide what should happen."

She held out her hand to him.

"Thank you, Mark," she said, simply; "you have given me something pleasant to remember after I go away. I have sometimes wished that you had never seen Miss Bligh; but if I may still believe that I come first——"

"You will always be first," he declared.

"Then I don't care! Your future will be happier than mine; but when all is said, it has been for your happiness much more than for my own that I have wished."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE RETURN OF THE HERO

To suffer from the inconstancy of another is, no doubt, a very painful thing; but it may almost be questioned whether it is not as painful—and certainly it is more provoking—to be the victim of an obstinate constancy which one is unable to share. Madame Souravieff had contrived to make Mark feel remorseful, and after he had left her, he spent some time in wishing that she had not forced him to be so mendacious, or that his professions could have been a shade more sincere, or that she would take a fancy to somebody else; but when he woke the next morning he naturally saw things in a somewhat different light, and was only thankful that she was going away. It was all very well for her to say that she desired nothing but his happiness; but she would never have the patience or forbearance to look on while he worked out his own happiness in his own way, and so long as she remained at Upton Chetwode

the danger of her ruining everything by some sudden *coup de tête* would always be imminent.

Of this she herself was probably aware, and she was also aware of a reluctance to depart which warned her to lose no time in taking her departure. It was characteristic of the woman to drive over to the Priory in order to say good-bye to Cicely Bligh—a ceremony which, under all the circumstances, might very well have been omitted. She did not care about seeing Cicely, and it seemed unlikely that Cicely could be anxious to see her; but, on the other hand, the idea of slinking away from the place like a defaulter was unpleasant to her, and she did not choose to have the appearance of shirking an uncomfortable interview. Like the generality of those who pride themselves upon their tact, Madame Souravieff was prone to disregard ordinary rules in her tactics and to believe that she could carry anything off.

As was to be expected, she met with a very icy reception from Cicely, whose attitude of disdainful reserve she found it impossible to break down.

"I do not know whether we shall meet again in this world, Miss Bligh," she said; "but I never forget my friends, and I shall not forget you. Perhaps I may have news of you every now and then from Mr. Chetwode."

"Perhaps—if he remains in these parts," answered Cicely.

"I imagine that he will remain in these parts. Will you think me very impertinent if I tell you how glad I was to hear that your cousin had left these parts for good?"

Cicely looked as if she did think her impertinent, but abstained from saying so.

"He is a good young man in his way," Madame Souravieff went on; "but he is not good enough for you, and I am rejoiced that you have found that out in time. I do not even feel sorry for him," she added; "because

he would always have been conscious of his inferiority, and it cannot be pleasant for a husband to know that he is his wife's inferior."

"It was not for any reason of that kind that the engagement was broken off," said Cicely, who suspected that Madame Souravieff was covertly laughing at her. "Where do you think of going when you leave this?"

"To Paris in the first instance; after that I shall be guided by circumstances. Possibly I may join my husband in Germany, but more probably he will implore me to remain away from him. I think I told you that my husband had kindly given me leave to go where I liked, so long as I did not stay in Mr. Chetwode's neighbourhood. I am obliged to obey him, although, as you know, his suspicions are sufficiently ridiculous."

"They certainly seem to be so," said Cicely, coldly.

Madame Souravieff would have paid a good deal of money for the privilege of addressing a few home truths to this supercilious young woman; but she had determined to retain her self-possession. To save herself from losing it, she rose and took her leave; and it was a pity, for her sake, that she did not know how angry she had made her successful rival. To Cicely it seemed evident that she had called for the express purpose of making those few observations about Archie and of hinting, not very obscurely, that she intended to meet him in Paris. She had apparently forgotten the animosity against Mr. Chetwode which she had displayed in so indecorous a manner on the occasion of the prize-giving.

"Well," thought Cicely, "it is not worth while to lose one's temper with her, but I trust I may never see her again."

A few days after this, Mark called at the Priory and announced that he had once more taken up his abode at Upton Chetwode.

"My tenant has left," he said, "and I am my own master again. For reasons that you know of, I couldn't quite feel that I was that while she was here."

"I don't want to talk about her," answered Cicely, with a gesture of disgust; "let us try to forget her."

"With all my heart," returned Mark, smiling slightly; "but perhaps it is wholesome for me to remember sometimes that she once made a fool of me."

He was very careful and very discreet; he understood that before he could venture to proclaim himself Cicely's lover he must become her trusted friend, and it was in the latter capacity that he strove, as heretofore, to ingratiate himself with her. Upon the whole he was very well satisfied with the progress that he made in the course of the ensuing week. It was not difficult to intercept her on her way to or from the village, and she always seemed glad to meet him—as in truth she was. At the bottom of her heart she may have suspected that he cherished somewhat warmer sentiments than those of mere friendship for her; but as those sentiments, if they existed, were kept to himself, there was no need to trouble about them. He had a practical, dispassionate way of looking at things which made her think highly of his sagacity, and although she never actually consulted him with reference to the many daily questions upon which it was her duty to adjudicate, she fell into the habit of mentioning these to him in the course of conversation. Probably it did not diminish her good opinion of him to find that his views invariably coincided with her own.

One afternoon she was sauntering homewards with this trustworthy neighbour, whom she had, as usual, encountered by chance on the outskirts of Abbotsport, when the sound of a view halloo behind her made her stop short and look round. There was but one person in the county who would have ventured to attract her attention after that unceremonious fashion, and as the person in question was a very particular friend of hers, she was delighted to recognize his powerful voice. But Sir George Dare, whose thickset figure could be seen advancing rapidly from the distance, was not alone;

and who could his slim, interesting-looking companion be? Surely not Bobby, bearded and bronzed, and carrying his left arm in a sling! Bobby, however, it was; and as he drew nearer, Cicely at once perceived that it would not accord with the fitness of things to address him as Bobby any longer. A few months may suffice to change a boy into a man, and the wounded hero who was taking off his hat to her evidently possessed the right to be called Mr. Dare in future.

"How do you do, my dear?" called out Sir George; and then, in somewhat less cordial accents, "How are you, Chetwode? Bob and I were on our way to pay our respects at the Priory," he continued. "We've got him back, you see, safe and pretty nearly sound. Not quite fit to use his bridle-arm yet; but that's no great loss to him, you'll say. Never mind, Bob, there are more good riders than good fighters in the world, you may depend upon it."

Bobby's sunburnt cheeks assumed a more vivid hue. His father's unconscionable crowing had already made him long to hide his head more than once, and he felt sure that Miss Bligh must be inwardly laughing at them both. But in this he wronged Cicely, who held out her hand to him with a bright smile and said:

"I am so very glad to see you home again, Mr. Dare! Is your arm very bad still?"

"Oh, it's nothing," answered Bobby, rather shamefacedly. "I got rather seedy out there because of the heat, and the doctors made me take sick leave; but I've really no business to be here. The voyage back put me all right."

"Well, now that you are here, you will have to stay until the doctors allow you to go away again," said Cicely decisively; "and I hope the doctors won't be in any hurry about it. Other people ought to be given a chance of earning glory."

Bobby looked down and murmured something unintelligible. Sir George had marched on ahead with

Mark Chetwode, who resignedly accepted the companionship thrust upon him.

"So you're back in your own house, I hear," said Sir George cheerfully. "Not sorry to be out of those stuffy lodgings, I daresay. And what has become of your fair tenant?"

"I think Madame Souravieff said that she intended to go to Paris," answered Mark.

"Oh, she did, eh? Well, that's what everybody seems to have taken for granted. H'm!—queer business, first and last. No business of mine, though, of course."

"A queer business?" repeated Mark, innocently.

"I mean about young Bligh. Probably you know the ins and outs of it a great deal better than I do; but it's no secret that your friend was the cause of his engagement being broken off."

Mark emphatically disclaimed the knowledge imputed to him; yet he allowed it to be inferred that he knew more than he cared to talk about. It was desirable that the county should hold the theory suggested by Sir George; but it was not desirable that he should be held in any way responsible for it. As a matter of fact, Sir George was not greatly interested in the question of what had become of Madame Souravieff. That wily old gentleman's object was to afford his son a legitimate opportunity, and he was quite satisfied with his success in that respect. Probably he did not take into account the uncalled-for diffidence with which his son was afflicted.

Bobby, indeed, could find very little to say to the girl whom he still adored and at whom he glanced shyly out of the corner of his eye as he walked beside her; but this was of no great consequence, since Cicely was fully equal to sustaining the whole burden of the conversation. She wished for particulars of the engagement in which he had received his wound, and professed to be much disappointed with the dry and

featureless account that he gave her of that affray. Did he think that he would get the Victoria Cross? Well, what was there to laugh at in that? Was not the Victoria Cross bestowed for acts of conspicuous bravery, and could anybody deny that his acts had been conspicuously brave? At the very least the authorities would take care that he had quick promotion, she supposed. But if there was no certainty about that, and if officers were not necessarily promoted for performing their duty with splendid success, what in the world were they promoted for!

Now such questions as these, together with the succinct replies which they elicited, might have sufficed to keep the conversation alive for an indefinite length of time if Bobby had been disposed to submit to that kind of thing; but, meek as he was, he could not stand more than five minutes of it. In the first place, his modesty was unfeigned, and in the second, he more than half suspected that Cicely's persistency in talking about him was caused by unwillingness to talk about herself. So at last he interrupted her rather bluntly by saying:

"Your life has been more eventful than mine since I saw you last. I wanted to write and tell you how sorry I was to hear of Mr. Bligh's death and—and all your other troubles; but then I thought perhaps you wouldn't care to be bothered with letters."

Cicely's face became graver and her voice more subdued.

"Of course I should have liked to hear from you," she answered. "Ordinary letters of condolence *are* rather more of a bother than a comfort, perhaps; but yours, I know, would have been sincere. However, I didn't require it to feel sure of your sympathy."

"Well," said Bobby, "I am glad of that." And after a pause, he added: "I have often thought of that evening when I saw you for the last time before I went away. I wonder whether you remember it?"

"I remember it very well; and I remember that you went away without saying good-bye to us—which was not very friendly of you."

"Oh, you know why I did that; it was the best thing I could do. I was only wondering whether you remembered what I said to you about Archie that evening."

"Yes," answered Cicely, with a rather troubled look; "but we needn't go back to that now, need we? You have heard of what has happened since, and—and that it is all over and done with?"

"I am not sure that I have heard all that has happened. My people told me a story which I couldn't quite swallow. About Archie's going away, I mean, and the supposed reason."

"Oh, I daresay people have discovered plenty of supposed reasons. Surely, when Archie and I came to the conclusion that we were not very well suited to one another and that our engagement must be broken off, that was reason enough for his going away."

"But not for his disappearing and leaving no address. I don't wonder that people should believe the story of his having gone off to join the Russian lady abroad; but I don't believe it myself. I know Archie well enough to know that that isn't the kind of thing he would do. He is too much of a gentleman."

It is usually the most simple and modest of men who take the most startling liberties. Bobby seemed to think it so much a matter of course that he should speak in this open way about a delicate subject, that Cicely, though astonished, could not feel offended with him. She said:

"Gentlemen have been known to act in that way before now, I believe. However, I haven't inquired and don't mean to inquire into the truth of the report that you have heard. The reason which I gave you just now is a sufficient one."

"Yes, if it is a genuine one," answered Bobby

gravely; "but is it? I used to think that you would marry Archie to please your father; but afterwards I wasn't so sure. It was a great deal more likely that you cared for him for his own sake. Did you care for him for his own sake?"

Well, really this was a tolerably cool question, and if Bobby had not looked so serious over it, Cicely would have been almost inclined to laugh. As it was, she only said:

"One may care a great deal for people whom one does not think it advisable to marry."

Bobby thought her answer somewhat ambiguous; but, such as it was, he had to content himself with it; for now the colloquy was interrupted by Sir George and Mr. Chetwode, the latter of whom wished to say good-bye. After he had retired, Cicely took her visitors on to the Priory, where they found Miss Skipwith and were refreshed with tea; but nothing further of an interesting nature was discussed except the capture of that slave-dhow, an episode which was not only uninteresting, but was rapidly becoming hateful to the person who had been chiefly concerned therein.

"May I come and see you again some day soon?" he asked, as he took leave of Cicely; and he received in reply a smiling assurance that he would always be welcome.

This assurance, however, was more satisfactory to Sir George, who overheard it, than to its recipient. However innocent and simple one may be, one knows what deduction to draw from a too ready display of cordiality.

LIBRARY OF THE BOMBAY

CHAPTER XXXIX.

CICELY IS INCENSED

"WELL," said Sir George, as he walked away with his son, "how did you get on? Able to report progress, eh? I did the best I could for you, you know."

"I am still rather in the dark," answered Bobby; "I hadn't time to ask many questions. But from what she told me, I'm more convinced than ever that there is some mistake or misunderstanding about Archie."

"Oh, Archie be bothered! He has chosen to make a bolt for it, and who cares whether he is playing the fool in Paris with Madame Stick-in-the-Mud or whether he is disporting himself in Jericho?"

"I think Miss Bligh cares," said Bobby, quietly.

"The deuce you do!" returned his father, glancing sharply at him. "What makes you think that?"

"I can't tell you exactly—her whole manner, I suppose. She didn't say much; but I could see that she felt a good deal. I fancy that if she hadn't cared for him she would have made some effort to find out the truth. She must know very well that he wouldn't have vanished in that way just because of some lover's quarrel."

"H'm! You've heard what your sister thinks about it?"

"Yes; and I daresay she is right to some extent. It isn't at all improbable that Chetwode would like to step into Archie's shoes, and—and he's a shifty-looking fellow; I don't fancy those shallow eyes of his. Oh, yes; I shouldn't wonder if he was dangerous; only I should want a little more proof before I believed that legend about Madame Souravieff. You see, I've known Archie all my life, and——"

"God bless me!" broke in his father, impatiently;

"one would think that you wanted to whitewash the fellow! Would it give you any particular satisfaction to drag him back by the hair of his head and marry him to a girl whose shoes he isn't fit to black?"

"It would, if I thought she wished it. Anyhow, it would give me satisfaction to get at the truth. And, you know, there isn't the slightest hope for me."

"I know nothing of the kind," Sir George declared.

"Well, I know it; and as I can't have what I want, I should like her to have what she wants. I don't believe she wants to marry Chetwode—yet."

Sir George threw up his hands, tossed his head, and snorted.

"Oh dear! oh dear!" he exclaimed; "what fools we all are when we are young, and how little use our wisdom is to us when we have grown old! If only I were in this fellow's place, I'd undertake to put everything right in a brace of shakes. Don't I know that girls can be made to fall in love with any man who is young and good-looking—especially when he has his arm in a sling! But do you suppose for a moment that this little Don Quixote is going to profit by his advantages! Not he! What he proposes to do is to back up one of his rivals, who has retired from the contest, and to let the other step in and carry off the prize. There's a pretty sort of a raving lunatic for you!"

"But I don't mean Chetwode to carry off the prize, if I can help it," objected Bobby, mildly. "I suspect —but perhaps I had better not say what I suspect yet awhile. At all events, you may be quite sure that if I thought I had any chances, or advantages, as you call them, I shouldn't hesitate to use them."

"That's the first sensible thing I've heard you say," grunted Sir George.

Now, what Bobby suspected was that Mark had somehow or other been instrumental in procuring Archie's removal from the scene; and that his con-

jecture should have been so correct is a remarkable instance of the kind of acuteness which goes with simplicity. Archie, he reasoned, assuredly had not fled from home and friends on account of any difference that might have arisen between him and Cicely. Somebody, therefore, must have induced him, either by misrepresentations or in some other way, to disappear; and who, except Mark Chetwode, had an interest in his disappearance? Bobby, at all events, could think of no one else; but he resolved to make such inquiries as he could and to keep his weather eye open.

And no doubt it was a very sound instinct that prompted him to apply in the first instance to the Rector of the parish, Mr. Lowndes being so reasonable and sensible a man. Bobby simply put it to this refreshingly sane person whether it was or was not credible that Archie had been guilty of the folly imputed to him, and Mr. Lowndes answered unhesitatingly:

"My dear boy, of course it's incredible, and I have said so all along. But don't you know that incredible things are always sure to be believed? And, unfortunately, Archie has given people a right to form any conjectures they please about him. I did send a letter after him; but he hasn't taken any notice of it, and I can only suppose that he is under some influence of which I am ignorant. I don't mean Madame Souravieff's influence."

"Exactly so," agreed Bobby: "that is just my own idea. And whose influence *do* you mean?"

Mr. Lowndes was rather reluctant to commit himself to a decided expression of opinion; but when Mark Chetwode's name was suggested to him, he admitted that the surmise did not lack plausibility.

"And since you seem to be interested in the unravelling of this mystery," he added, "I will tell you another thing. That old rascal Coppard knows something. His conscience is not at ease, and he has been asking me questions about Mr. Chetwode which mere

curiosity won't account for. If I were a Roman Catholic priest I would get it out of him at once; only then, I suppose, I shouldn't be allowed to tell. As it is, he pretends to be partially imbecile when I try to cross-examine him."

Bobby made a mental note upon the subject and, after a little further conversation, pursued his way to the Priory, whither he was bound. He wanted to hear something rather more definite from Cicely than he had heard in the course of their first interview. Both Miss Bligh and Miss Skipwith were out, he was informed, on reaching his destination; but as this was not a mere formal visit, he did not content himself with leaving his card, but having ascertained that Cicely generally came home soon after five o'clock, said he would stroll about the garden until she returned. That her approach would be from the direction of Abbotsport seemed probable; so he passed along the lawns and terraces and between long beds, gay with dahlias and other autumnal flowers, until he reached the little iron gate whence a footpath led across the falling ground of the park towards the village. There he halted, and, leaning over the fence, awaited events with a somewhat sombre countenance. Because, after all, it is very possible to be a little Don Quixote without finding the part an exhilarating one.

He did not, however, have to chew the cud of his meditations until it turned hopelessly bitter in his mouth; for scarcely five minutes had elapsed before Cicely hove in sight. She was making her way slowly up the hill, and by her side, as Bobby was not at all surprised to see, walked Mark Chetwode. Somehow he had felt certain that Mark would be with her, and the fulfilment of his expectations only had the effect of making him mutter:

"No, you don't, my fine fellow. Not if I can help it at least."

But he had an amiable smile ready for Cicely and a

courteous greeting for her companion, who, being taken by surprise, looked annoyed for about a second. Mark seldom looked annoyed or surprised or anything else for more than a second. His countenance speedily became a total blank, and while Cicely was saying civil things to the intruder, he debated with himself whether he should go on to the house and have a cup of tea or not. He decided that he would not; for he knew that, if this troublesome nautical personage had anything of a disagreeable nature to say, he would sooner or later find some opportunity of saying it, and it was just as well to let him say it now and get it over. That Bobby had been, and probably still was, enamoured of Cicely he was quite well aware; but that in itself could hardly be regarded as an alarming circumstance. He therefore excused himself from accepting the invitation which was presently extended to him, and scarcely was he out of sight when Bobby, with that directness which seems to be one of the many pleasing and salutary results of a seafaring life, remarked:

"Archie is worth half a dozen of *him*, anyhow!"

"You may as well make it a dozen while you are at it," said Cicely, who was not altogether pleased to find that Archie had so warm a partisan in that unexpected quarter. "Why do things by halves?"

"Well, I don't mind saying a dozen," answered Bobby, generously. "Do you agree?"

"Oh, that's another question. I suppose people and things are worth just what we happen to think them worth, and I daresay Archie might be worth a dozen of Mr. Chetwodes to you."

"But not to you?"

"No, since you ask me, he is not worth quite so much as that to me. Will you come in and have some tea now?"

"Presently, if I may; but I am afraid we shall find your aunt in the room, and while we are alone I want to beg once more for the answer which you wouldn't

give me the other day. I want to know whether you really loved Archie or not?"

"Do you indeed? You are a very determined person, Mr. Dare——"

"You used to call me Bobby once upon a time," interpolated her companion.

"Yes; but now that you have become so stern and dictatorial, I can't venture to be as familiar as I was once upon a time. I was going to say that you are a very determined person, and that I don't wonder at Arab slave-dealers being frightened of you."

"They weren't much frightened; nor are you. Please, give me an answer."

"I did give you one the other day, though I might have claimed the right to refuse it. I told you that one may easily have a sincere affection for a man whom one does not wish to marry."

"Only that's no answer at all, you see. What I want to get at is whether you were glad or sorry to lose him?"

"But—may I make so bold as to remind you that I am not being tried by court-martial? I'm afraid you'll have to be satisfied with hearing what has satisfied other people. Archie and I couldn't agree; so we parted—that's all. If you are meditating doing us a service by bring us together again, let me assure you that we shouldn't like it. You would never be able to manage anything of the kind; still you had better be spared the trouble of trying."

"I haven't a doubt that I should be doing Archie a service," remarked Bobby, musingly; "but I confess that I am not quite as anxious to serve him as to serve you, and I am not sure what your wishes are. Would it make any difference if I could tell you what made him take to his heels?"

"Can you tell me?" asked Cicely, quickly.

"Then she doesn't know, and she is anxious to know," thought Bobby to himself. He answered:

"Not now; but I may contrive to find out before long. Meanwhile, I hope you'll beware of that man Chetwode."

"I don't quite understand you," said Cicely, drawing herself up a little. "Why should I beware of Mr. Chetwode?"

"I can't help fancying that he is at the bottom of this business. It's only an idea, and I haven't any proofs as yet; but——"

"Then, really," interrupted Cicely, "I don't think you ought to say such things. As a matter of fact he had no more to do with Archie's going away than you had. What motive could he have for interfering between us?"

"Well, that's just it, you see: the motive stares one in the face. Everybody says he wants to replace Archie. Of course, I don't blame him for that."

"How noble of you not to blame him for these intentions of his which everybody knows about!" exclaimed Cicely, scornfully. "The only thing that you blame him for, it appears, is having kidnapped Archie—for I suppose you must think that Archie was kidnapped."

"Oh, that doesn't necessarily follow."

"Spirited away then, in some unexplained fashion. At all events, your sapience has persuaded you that Mr. Chetwode is a profound schemer. Well, since you take such an unselfish interest in my affairs, it is only fair that you should be told what Mr. Chetwode really is. He is about the best friend I have in the world. He has been kindness itself to me in all my troubles, and I can talk to him as I can talk to nobody else—because other people seem to be so hopelessly idiotic—and you may feel sure that I shall not cease to treat him as a friend on account of the duplicity which you and 'everybody' have been clever enough to discover."

Cicely, who had a fine colour in her cheeks, was evidently much incensed, and perhaps it did not mollify her very much to be assured that the interest which

Bobby took in her affairs was of a purely unselfish nature.

"In spite of what you say," he declared, "I don't believe you care for that demi-semi Russian, and I do believe that you care for Archie. I suppose I mustn't venture to call myself your friend; but I mean to act as your friend, if I can, all the same."

"I think you are very officious and very impertinent," Cicely was provoked into saying.

Thereupon Bobby apologized humbly enough. He said he could quite understand that he must appear to be both, and perhaps he ought not to have spoken out so plainly what was in his mind. Nevertheless, he could not retract his words. Time would show whether he was right or not.

"I hope," answered Cicely, "that if time shows you nothing else, it will show you the senselessness of listening to gossip and taking it for gospel."

There was no answer to be made to that well-merited rebuke, and Bobby attempted none. He went into the house and had some tea and departed shortly afterwards, without having attained the object of his visit, except in so far as that Cicely's language had confirmed his previous suspicions. She had never said that she did not love Archie, and she had made it tolerably plain to a disinterested outsider that there was danger of her accepting Chetwode out of pique. The disinterested outsider was of opinion that such a calamity must be averted at all hazards.

CHAPTER XL.

BOBBY AS A DETECTIVE

On that mild autumnal season the Abbotsport fish-trade was very dull. The villagers, it is true, were in no immediate want, because, being of an amphibious

nature, they had lately been doing a little work (which they hated) in helping to get in the harvest and had received the wages which were their due. Still rent-day was drawing near, and the herring could not be expected for many weeks to come, and there seemed to be no better use for an unemployed working man to make of his time than to lounge over the bar at the Seven Stars and discourse gravely about the many troubles and anxieties which beset all mortals in this hard world. Nothing lessens trouble so much as talking about it, and no one can talk upon any subject for an hour at a stretch without requiring to quench his thirst; so that if times were slack for some people, they were busy enough for the landlord of the Seven Stars, a sympathetic person, and one who was ever willing to allow credit to such of his customers as deserved it.

Perhaps Mr. Coppard did not deserve it. At any rate, he had been given to understand that he would get no more of it, and thus it came to pass that that worthy man was seated in his own house one afternoon, with his elbows on his knees and deep dejection depicted upon his countenance. Not only had he, for the reason above mentioned, been foiled of his fixed purpose of getting very drunk on the previous evening, but, by a most unfortunate oversight, he had left a little hardly earned money upon the kitchen-table for a few minutes, where it had been found and promptly appropriated by Mrs. Coppard. Now this was an altogether irretrievable misfortune; for Mrs. Coppard, as her husband often told her, was "that thriftless" that whenever she obtained possession of any coin of the realm she immediately went and spent it. And now she had been buying boots for the children—as if anybody wanted boots at that time of year—and was proportionately good-humoured and exultant.

"Well, 'tis something to have put 'ee in a good-humour, anyway," observed Coppard, with gloomy phi-

losophy; "that's what don't come about more'n once in a blue moon."

Mrs. Coppard from the back kitchen, where she was washing the family linen, shouted out a rejoinder which was doubtless appropriate, but the exact terms of which were inaudible. After a time she came in and stood, with her bare arms akimbo, contemplating her melancholy spouse.

"I do really b'lieve as you got somethin' on your mind, Coppard," she said at length. "Want of liquor alone can't account for such downheartedness."

"Got the rent on my mind," grunted Coppard. "How be I to keep a roof over our heads when all my small savins goes to pay for your extravagances, I'd like to know?"

"A tea-spoon'd be too big for to hold *your* savins," returned his wife; "and as for rent, it's little you trouble your mind about that. Well, you know as Miss Cicely wouldn't see us turned out into the street."

Coppard sighed heavily.

"Miss Cicely," said he, "won't remain single for ever; 'tain't likely. And by the look o' things, I doubt but she'll get a 'ard man o' business for her 'usband. That there Mr. Chetwode worn't born yesterday, nor yet the day afore."

"And you as couldn't find language powerful enough to praise him in not so long ago!" remarked Mrs. Coppard, with a contemptuous sniff. "As for me, I ain't varied, not from the first. 'None o' your slippery Rooshians for me,' says I. I'd a deal sooner see poor Mr. Harchie back, though I don't say as he beyaved very considerate to us. And I shouldn't wonder if you was repentin' already, Coppard, of what you done for to avenge yourself upon that young gentleman."

In saying this Mrs. Coppard was merely drawing a bow at a venture; but her husband's demeanour seemed to show that she had hit the mark. He raised his eyes,

frowning angrily, and asked her what she meant by that, emphasizing his question with two or three strenuous adjectives.

"A man as comes 'ome fuddled with drink lets out more'n he remembers," answered Mrs. Coppard, darkly.

Now, the truth was that Coppard had not let out much; but for anything that he knew to the contrary, he might have let out a great deal, and the idea that he had betrayed himself naturally made him both frightened and wrathful. He was telling Mrs. Coppard in grim and concise language what would happen to her if she hadn't sense enough to keep her tongue within her teeth, when his harangue was interrupted by the rapping of somebody's stick upon the door. This was immediately opened from without, and through the aperture was thrust the handsome face of Bobby Dare, who asked:

"May I come in?"

"Why, if 'tain't Cap'n Dare!" exclaimed Coppard, jumping up. "Come in, sir, and welcome. I did 'ear as you was back from the wars—and a terrible maulin' you've 'ad from them savages, they tell me."

"Not very terrible," answered Bobby. "I've got a bad arm; but that doesn't prevent me from steering a boat or holding a line, and I thought I should rather like an afternoon's fishing if you'd take me, Coppard."

Coppard assented readily. In the matter of payment he knew Mr. Dare to be animated by the feelings of a true gentleman, and he foresaw that it might yet be possible for him to spend an evening in congenial company at the Seven Stars. Moreover, he was not sorry to escape from his wife, who was an alarming person when irritated, and who, even at the best of times, possessed a remarkable faculty of worming admissions out of those who would fain keep their own counsel.

In less than a quarter of an hour, therefore, this much-enduring bread-winner was seated comfortably in

a lugger, which he had borrowed for the occasion (the owner being absent), while his employer, with the tiller under his arm, was holding a line over the side. As there was a fresh breeze blowing from the eastward, and as they were running before it, there was not much likelihood of Mr. Dare's catching many fish yet awhile; but the reader will scarcely require to be informed that Mr. Dare was not at sea that day for the purpose of catching fish. And presently he began in a cautious fashion to feel his way towards the attainment of his private ends.

"There have been great changes hereabouts since you and I were last in a boat together, Coppard," he remarked.

"You may say that, sir," agreed Coppard, shaking his head; "and none of 'em what you could call changes for the better neither. The old Squire, he's a sad loss to Abbotsport, and as to Mr. Morton, why, we don't know what he might ha' been if he'd lived. For we all has our faults, and we all looks to curin' ourselves of 'em in doo season."

"Well—yes; I suppose so. But as things have fallen out, you haven't much to complain of, have you? Miss Bligh will do all that her father ever did, I should think."

"You won't 'ear no two opinions in Abbotsport about Miss Cicely, sir. But what I feel, lookin' forrard a bit, is that we've got to count with a young lady now, 'stead of a young gentleman. And it's only to be expected as young ladies 'll marry."

"Oh, of course. And in point of fact she was very near marrying a man who would have managed the property admirably, I daresay. That was a curious affair—the engagement being broken off so suddenly."

"Very cur'ous indeed, sir," answered Coppard, briefly.

"I don't yet understand what the reason of it could have been," Bobby went on, ingenuously. "Being

away at the time, I have only heard rumours, and rumours are very seldom trustworthy."

Coppard grunted an assent to the general proposition, but did not seem inclined to say anything bearing upon the particular instance; nor had further leading questions the effect of overcoming his reticence. He agreed that Archie's disappearance was strange, and might even be considered unaccountable by some: he did not deny that it might have been due to causes which were as yet unknown to the public, and he said it was no doubt a pity that the property should be in danger of passing out of the hands of the Bligh family; but he would give no hint that he himself possessed more information upon the subject than the rest of the world. Under these circumstances, Bobby had recourse to persuasive measures for which no defence shall be attempted here. Drawing a flask from his pocket, he remarked:

"This easterly wind makes one feel as if it were January; a drop of whisky would do us both good, I think." He then swallowed a mouthful from the silver cup, and filling it up again, handed it to Coppard, who conscientiously emptied it with a sigh of appreciation.

"Have another nip?" said the Machiavellian Bobby; "that thing doesn't hold more than a thimbleful."

And when his invitation had been complied with he did not at once pursue the investigation with which he had made so little progress, but talked about the weather and the paucity of fish and one thing and another for a time. It was only when these topics seemed to be pretty well exhausted that he asked casually:

"What do you think of Mr. Chetwode, Coppard?"

"Well, sir," answered Coppard, whom the whisky had certainly disposed towards a less distrustful attitude, "betwixt you and me, I really don't know *what* to think of him."

"Of course you know what people say—that he is making up to Miss Bligh."

"I wouldn't swear as people was makin' any great mistake there, sir."

"And there seems to be an idea—though I daresay it's quite an unfounded one—that he had something to do with getting Archie Bligh out of the place. You had better finish that whisky, Coppard; you look chilled. As for me, I have been so thoroughly baked in the tropics that cold hardly affects me. Yes; that is one of the rumours that I have heard."

After draining the flask to the dregs, Coppard ruminated awhile with much seriousness. Coppard had a conscience, and of late it had been causing him a good deal of uneasiness; because further acquaintance with Mark Chetwode had not improved his opinion of that gentleman. That Mr. Chetwode loved Miss Cicely with an unselfish affection now seemed to him to be doubtful. However, the man was a masterful man and might easily prove to be a hard landlord. Finally, he had never given any money at all to one who had rendered him the greatest assistance; and this, to say the least of it, was ungrateful. Still the danger of betraying him was too great to be faced by an honest man who wished to keep out of prison. What might be done, and perhaps ought to be done, was to put Bobby on the scent. If that course of action should eventually lead to the retirement of Mr. Chetwode, well and good. If not, a sincere well-wisher of Miss Cicely's would at least have done all in his power to promote her welfare.

He accordingly said:

"Well, sir, that's a hidear as has occurred to some who ain't no fools."

"Including yourself, perhaps?" suggested Bobby.

"Thank'ee, sir, though maybe I don't deserve the compliment. But, to be sure, it don't want a deal o' wisdom to see 'twas Mr. Chetwode's interest to get t'other young gentleman out of the way."

"Just so. The only question is how did he contrive it?"

"Ah," said Coppard, "there, sir, you have me, I'll allow."

"I suppose you can't think of any way in which the thing might have been done."

Coppard was sorry to say that he really couldn't. Notions had come into his head; but Captain Dare would understand that some notions were best not put into words,

"Oh, I'm not asking you to put anything into words, except what you know," said Bobby. "I don't mind telling you that I am very anxious to get at the bottom of this mystery. Miss Bligh and I are old friends, and I shouldn't like her to fall a prey to a fortune-hunter, if any efforts of mine could prevent it."

"'Tis sailin' a bit near the wind," thought Coppard to himself; "howsomever I'll risk it." And he said: "If you should ask me, sir, I believe you couldn't do no better'n go straight to Mr. Chetwode and charge him with what you think he done. Press him 'ard, sir, and you'm bound to get a hanser out of him. I don't say but what he may have knowed somethin' to Mr. Harchie's disadvantage; but if he did, that don't excuse him from makin' a mean use of his knowledge, you see, sir."

More than this could not be coaxed out of Coppard; but it was obvious that he knew more and that pressure might subsequently be brought to bear upon him, if necessary. Coppard's own forecast of what would happen was that Mr. Chetwode, when accused of having brought about Archie's removal, would simply say: "Well, what if I did bring it about? What if I know him to be the murderer of Miss Bligh's brother?" "You'll have to prove that," Bobby would rejoin; "and even if you can prove it, it isn't over and above likely that Miss Bligh will marry the informer." Thus Mark might be checkmated, and Archie, being guilty, would not venture to return, and fixity of tenure might be assured for a certain length of time to those who owed rent to an unmarried lady.

Bobby acted upon the advice offered to him because it accorded with his own ideas of straightforwardness. After he had been put ashore, he shaped his course for Upton Chetwode, and as he was nearing the house he overtook Mark himself, to whom he said:

"I was going to call upon you. I rather want to have a talk with you, if you'll allow me."

"I shall be charmed," answered Mark, urbanely.

"Well, I am not sure that what I have to say will be exactly charming; but perhaps you'll excuse my saying it. The fact of the matter is that I believe you can tell me, if you choose, more than I know at present about Archie Bligh."

Mark shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"How much do you know at present?" he inquired.

"I know what everybody knows, that he has absconded; and I know that no satisfactory reason has been given for his doing such an improbable thing."

"And you think that I can give you a satisfactory reason? Well, it is true that, so far as I know, I was the last person whom he saw in Abbotsport. He came to my lodgings the night before he left, and told me that he had made up his mind to go away and to break off his engagement to his cousin."

"Without offering an explanation."

"I am not prepared to repeat all that passed in the course of a confidential interview. I may have received hints and I may have formed conjectures. Other people, as you are probably aware, have also formed conjectures."

"Yes; but I am convinced that they are false. And I imagine that you know they are false."

"Why should you imagine that, Mr. Dare?"

"I'll tell you presently; anyhow, I do imagine it. Amongst other conjectures which have been made, it has been conjectured, you know, that you are—in short, that you are an admirer of Miss Bligh's."

"Ah, yes; that was sure to be said," remarked

Mr. Chetwode, composedly. And he added, with a smile, "Do you know, I have heard the same thing said about you?"

"I suppose that must have been before I went away. I don't mind your knowing that I proposed to her and that she refused me; there's nothing to be ashamed of in that. But it is said—whether truly or not of course I can't tell—that you are thinking of proposing to her now; and that naturally gives rise to a suspicion that you may have had something to do with Archie's disappearance."

"A suspicion on your part or on the part of the neighbourhood generally?" asked Mark, still smiling.

"We'll call it a suspicion on my part if you like. I am ready to apologize if you can show me that there is no foundation for it."

"My dear sir, I am sorry that you should entertain suspicions which are neither flattering nor warrantable; but I must respectfully decline your invitation to prove a negative."

Bobby had scarcely expected that such an invitation would be complied with; but he had another shot left in his locker, which he now fired.

"I've just been talking to old Coppard," he said, suddenly.

Mark could not exactly be said to start; but there came an expression of alertness and inquiry into his face which showed that the statement was not without significance to him. He said:

"Coppard, the boatman? Yes?"

"I have reason to think that Coppard is in possession of information which he hasn't seen fit to impart to me. However, I got something like an admission from him that you could tell me what I want to know, if you chose."

Mark at once saw the danger of a direct denial. He answered:

"I might question your right to catechize me, Mr. Dare; but I won't do that. I will only take the liberty

of warning you that you are meddling with matters which it would perhaps be better, for everybody's sake, to leave alone. Personally, I may say that I have nothing to fear from any inquiries or discoveries that you may make, and you must pardon my refusing to say another word upon the subject."

To this determination he politely adhered, notwithstanding Bobby's somewhat maladroit efforts to squeeze him. Nevertheless, the latter did not go away discomfited; for he now considered it to be beyond a doubt that Mark Chetwode had been concerned in Archie's mysterious exit, and that same evening he wrote a long letter to his former rival, in which he said, amongst other things:

"It is perfectly clear to me that Chetwode has scared you out of the place for purposes of his own, and if you don't come back at once and face the trouble, whatever it may be, he will most likely succeed. I haven't an idea what you have done, or are supposed to have done; but I daresay there aren't a great many men who would like the whole history of their lives to be told to the woman whom they love, and I don't believe that there are many women worth anything who wouldn't be willing to forgive and forget the past. I mustn't presume to answer for Miss Bligh; but my impression is that she cares a good deal more for you than she does for that cold-blooded beggar. All the same, it isn't a bit unlikely that she will marry him if you don't come back and stand up for yourself."

This persuasive epistle Bobby despatched to Archie's club, the address of which he had obtained from Mr. Lowndes, and it may be hoped that after laying down his pen he experienced the reward which virtue is said to carry with it. For he himself was no whit less in love with Cicely than he had always been, and although he was strenuously opposed to her marrying Mark Chetwode, it could not be an unmixed pleasure to him to see her married to anybody else.

CHAPTER XLI.

ARCHIE IS MADE TO WAIT

IMMEDIATELY after his arrival in London, Archie presented the letters of introduction with which Mark Chetwode had been kind enough to supply him, and met with a reception which was, upon the whole, as friendly as he had any right to expect. If he had not been utterly reckless and indifferent, he might have thought twice before placing himself without reserve at the disposal of persons whose appearance and manners were scarcely such as to inspire unlimited confidence; but he really did not care in the least what became of him, and, as he told them, the more dangerous the service upon which they might see fit to employ him, the better he would be pleased. There were a good many of them; they were of both sexes, and apparently of almost every social grade; it did not strike him that they were very much in earnest, nor was he greatly impressed by the patriotism to which they laid claim. Still, the ceremony of his initiation was impressive enough, and they all agreed in assuring him that stirring events were at hand. If danger was what he wished for, they said, there was every probability of his wishes being gratified before long. He gathered that there was going to be a simultaneous rising in Bulgaria and Montenegro, that the King of Servia was to be deposed, and that an outbreak in Macedonia might be counted upon as certain to follow; but his informants were chary of details—indeed he suspected that they themselves did not possess very accurate information—and he was somewhat curtly instructed to await orders and refrain from superfluous questions.

What seemed to give his fellow-conspirators a more

favourable idea of him than they had entertained at the outset, was the discovery that he had plenty of ready money. When it was made clear to them that he was prepared, not only to pay his own expenses but to make a handsome contribution to the general fund, they became quite pleasant and good-humoured, and some of them even went the length of advising him to remain where he was for the present. That was evidently what they proposed to do, and they pointed out that there are many better ways of serving a good cause than dying for it. But Archie, who wanted to die—or at all events thought that he did—confessed candidly that he had no predilection for one cause rather than another, and begged that he might be despatched without delay to any place in which fighting was likely to occur.

"In the way of fighting I may be of some use to you," he said; "but I doubt whether you'll find me much of an acquisition in any other respect. Diplomacy isn't in my line."

It was a relief to him when at length the desired marching orders reached him, though these were not quite as precise as he could have wished. He was to proceed to Athens and there await further instructions. His ultimate destination might possibly be Salonica; but this was uncertain. At any rate, efforts would be made to procure for him the command of a body of irregular cavalry. He was, however, reminded at the last moment of the obligation which he had taken upon himself, and was cautioned that he had no right to select the manner of his employment. That was a point for the decision of his superiors.

Probably very few people know what despair means, and it may be surmised that a man who is literally despairing almost always puts an end to himself. This was in point of fact what Archie intended to do; for he was resolved not to survive his first battle, and in the meantime he felt that he was to all intents and purposes dead already. He was not conscious of being particularly

miserable, though he was never free from a dull pain about the region of the heart. He managed to eat and sleep; the only strong emotion that he experienced was one of impatience, and his only dread was that he might be severely wounded without being killed outright. The long journey to Brindisi reminded him every now and then that he had traversed the same ground under very different circumstances on his return from India; but the memory caused him very little pain. The Archie Bligh of those days seemed to him to have been a youth whom he had once known intimately, but in whom he no longer felt much interest. He was sorry for the poor fellow to whom fate had been so exceptionally cruel; yet he scarcely identified himself with that luckless being.

And when he had taken his passage from Brindisi on the Austrian Lloyd's steamer, and the snow-capped summits of the Acroceraunian coast came in sight, and later on, when he sat on deck staring moodily at the olive-groves and vineyards and the sunny slopes of the Ionian Islands, and later still, when the Gulf of Corinth had been entered and the bare, purple mountains of the Peloponnesus rose in jagged outlines against the southern sky, neither the scenery nor the exquisite colouring, nor all the associations that belong to that renowned land, availed to rouse him from his apathy. The impertinent little modern city upon which the majestic Parthenon looks down; the almost perfect Theseum, which he could discern from the window of the railway carriage; the columns of the fallen Temple of Jupiter Olympius; and Lycabettus and brown Hymettus and distant Pentelicus—all these interested him no more than the chimneys of Birmingham or Manchester would have done. To him Athens was but a halting-place on his way towards an inevitable goal, and all he desired was that his halt might be made brief.

However, he had to spend a restless week amidst

those classic scenes; for the Russian gentlemen who received him, and who were civil enough, did not seem to know very well what they were to do with their recruit, nor could they tell him much about the projected rising. Doubtless instructions would reach them in the course of a day or two, they said. Meanwhile, would he be so good as to behave like a tourist and avoid mentioning the name of Bulgaria to anybody? They were living, they explained, amongst people who were naturally hostile to their schemes, and any indiscretion on his part might render their position most uncomfortable. Consequently, a laconic behest which they received from Constantinople was no less welcome to them than it was to him. He was to report himself at the latter city, it appeared, and it was added that work would be found for him before long.

"Work means active service, I presume," said Archie, who was beginning to feel some uneasy doubts as to the reality of this mysterious campaign, but his colleagues could only shrug their shoulders and reply that they hoped so. Their business, for the time being, was merely to observe and report upon the state of public feeling in Greece; the plans of those in authority were not usually revealed to subordinates until the moment for action had arrived. At Constantinople, however, he would meet with more influential and better informed persons.

To Constantinople, therefore, he went, and if the persons to whom he duly presented himself there were more influential than those with whom he had previously had to deal, they were also more reticent and a good deal more suspicious. To what race or races they belonged, Archie did not discover; but he gathered that some of them were Russians and some Bulgars. They could not or would not speak English, and it was in French—a language with which he was about as familiar as the ordinary British officer—that he had to reply to endless interrogatories. Again and

again he was questioned as to his motives, and his reiterated answer that he simply wished, for private reasons of his own, to take part in some forlorn hope, was evidently not found satisfactory. As for the raising of that body of irregular horse of which he had heard, the black-browed, saturnine individual who was most active in cross-examining him, seemed to be faintly amused by the mention of such a project, but merely observed that Mr. Bligh would be told at the proper time what was required of him.

The proper time had apparently not yet come; for the only orders that Archie received were to attend occasional meetings in a dirty little back room in Galata, where lengthy discussions took place in a tongue unknown to him, and where his presence was for the most part ignored. The hotel in which he had taken up his quarters was close, dirty, and evil-smelling. It was almost empty, for at that season of the year everybody who could escape from Constantinople had moved to the shores of the Bosphorus, and in order to avoid exciting suspicion, he thought it best to engage a dragoman and have himself conducted to St. Sophia and the bazaars of Stamboul, and the other sights which it is the duty of tourists to visit. It was weary work, and the dragoman was annoyed because he could not even pretend to take an interest in anything that was shown to him. He fancied, too, that his footsteps were dogged; though whether by an agent of the police or by an emissary of his fellow-conspirators he neither knew nor cared. Both were very welcome to keep an eye upon him, and if it should seem advisable to the latter to have him murdered, he had no objection.

But at length he fell in with one fellow-conspirator who cheered him up a little. This was a certain Theodori, a Greek or Levantine by birth, but a cosmopolitan by choice and force of circumstances, and, as it seemed, a trusted member of the Panslavonic

Society. Theodori was a middle-aged man with a very dark complexion, a good-humoured mouth, beady black eyes, and hair which was rapidly turning grey. He followed Archie away from one of the solemn meetings above mentioned, caught him up and addressed him in excellent English.

"All this is a bore to you, is it not, Mr. Bligh?" he asked.

"It is a great bore to be kept here in idleness," answered Archie. "I don't know what they are talking about, and I don't know what they mean to do. Sometimes I doubt whether they mean to do anything at all."

"Oh, they mean to do something; it is even possible that they may succeed in doing it. But they have many difficulties to contend against; not the least of which is that they have to count with people upon whom they can't implicitly rely."

"They certainly don't seem to rely upon me," observed Archie. "I rather think they have put on a spy to watch me."

"That is quite possible. You see, they do not know much about Englishmen, and you are rather a puzzle to them. I suppose I may take it for granted that you care for the future of Bulgaria just as much as I do—which is nothing at all."

"They appear to have confidence in you."

"Well, I have earned it. For many years past I have been concerned in every plot and revolution that has taken place in Europe; it is well known that I have no money, except what I receive in return for services rendered, and it is thought that I have generally earned my pay. Besides, I am free from scruples of any kind. You, on the other hand, have yet to win your spurs; and you must pardon these gentlemen if they don't feel altogether sure of you."

"I shall be very happy to show them that I can fight, if they will give me the chance," said Archie.

Theodori laughed.

"Ah, my dear sir, that is not a great thing to be able to do. I do not wish to depreciate your valour; but I have seen so much fighting in my time that I cannot attach any great value to fighting men. Physical cowardice in battle is not, believe me, a common failing."

"All the same," answered Archie, "I don't believe you will meet every day with a man who would rather be killed than not."

Theodori stood still under a lamp, lighted a cigar, and looked into his companion's eyes.

"Quite true?" he asked. "Not a figure of speech?"

"It is quite true," replied Archie, "that I am tired of life and that my only wish is to die."

The other contemplated him half ironically, half compassionately for a moment.

"I will report your words to the committee, if you like," he said. "They have not been very cordial with you, I know; but they are not wanting in humanity, and perhaps it is for your own sake that they have hesitated to employ you in enterprises which would almost certainly cost you your life."

"If so, their kindness has been entirely misplaced," Archie declared. "From the first I have always said that to lose my life was the very thing I wanted."

"Oh, well," laughed Theodori, "that is what a great many young people say."

He did not seem inclined to pursue the subject; but he returned to Archie's hotel with him, and drank two-thirds of a bottle of champagne with evident satisfaction, and narrated amusingly enough many of the episodes of an adventurous life. Archie liked the man, who indeed had the kind of fascination which belongs to recklessness and unscrupulousness, and who seemed to understand the nature of his case pretty well without asking questions about it. The two became friends after a fashion. They met every day, and Theodori, after vainly endeavouring to give the Englishman an insight

into the *menus plaisirs* of Pera, found a horse for him and took him out for rides into the country.

Well, that horse was a great comfort to poor Archie. He was utterly miserable and sick at heart; he was without hope and beyond all possibility of consolation; yet dead though his heart might be, his body was still alive, and to feel a spirited animal under him made the blood course more quickly through his veins, whether he wished it or not. Theodori, cantering beside him, used to throw queer, scrutinizing glances at him from time to time, much as a doctor will scrutinize a patient, and almost always his examination ended with a sigh.

"My dear Bligh," he said, one evening, when they had drawn rein in the Sweet Water Valley, and were gazing down the Golden Horn, "does it not sometimes occur to you that you are a very great fool? Life is pleasant even to me, who am poor and friendless and growing old: what must it not be to you, who are young and rich, and have nothing the matter with you, except that you have been crossed in love! Oh, I allow that it hurts very much to be crossed in love—it is worse even than a bad toothache—yet one survives it and forgets it, as one survives and forgets everything. Do you know what I would do if I were you? I would embark on board the very first steamer that leaves this port for England, and I would stay in my own country for a good long time to come. People are not stabbed in England."

"You mean that if I threw our friends over and remained here, they would have me murdered?"

"There is no doubt at all about that."

"Then if the worst comes to the worst, I can throw them over. You don't know how I am situated, Theodori; there is really nothing for me to do but to die."

"For the sake of some woman, I presume?"

"Well, yes; but I am not simply the love-sick youth that you take me for. I can't tell you my story; only

if you heard it, you would see that there is nothing insane in my wishing for death."

"It is a pity," said Theodori, musingly. And after they had put their horses in motion again and had jogged on for some little time in silence, he added: "You will get your wish, I think. These men, who probably seem to you a vapouring set of fellows, with more bark than bite in them, are quite in earnest, and they have some dangerous work to do. They are kind enough to say that I am too valuable to be sacrificed, otherwise I imagine they would have employed me."

"In what way?" asked Archie, quickly.

"That I should not be allowed to tell you if I knew. But I don't know. I merely guess. You and I have only to obey orders, with an encouraging certainty of being put to death if we are insubordinate. After all, that simplifies matters very much, and relieves one of all sense of responsibility."

"Yes," agreed Archie, rather hesitatingly; for his companion's remarks had suggested an unwelcome idea to him. Presently he asked: "Would you assassinate a man if you were ordered to do it, Theodori?"

"Oh, dear me, yes! Why not? In the first place, I should be compelled to do it; in the second place, the man would probably deserve it; finally, I have no objection to taking human life in cases of necessity. That is a principle which is universally admitted, you know. Thousands of lives are taken for the sake of altering a frontier-line; and it is only in quite recent times that civilized nations have given up executing their criminals for theft."

"Still, I suppose you wouldn't like to be an executioner?"

"Not for choice," answered Theodori, laughing. "However, I have never been ordered to execute anybody, and I daresay I never shall be."

He put his horse into a gallop, and no more was said until they entered the streets of Stamboul. Then he

would talk about nothing but the charms of a certain singer whom he had seen the night before at a *café-chantant*, a subject which possessed no interest for Archie. But after crossing the Galata Bridge, where they parted, he said suddenly:

"You won't take my advice and ship yourself off home, then?"

Archie shook his head.

"That is impossible!" he answered.

"Well," said Theodori for the second time, "it is a pity. Good-night."

CHAPTER XLII.

THEODORI DECLINES A FORTUNE

It was probably in consequence of favourable reports received from Theodori that Archie's distrustful masters became more friendly with him, and assumed a less guarded attitude when he was present at the councils. Some of them began to address him in his own language, with which they appeared to be somewhat better acquainted than he was with any foreign tongue, and through them he learnt something of the alleged position of affairs in Bulgaria. The people, he was told, were thoroughly dissatisfied with their present ruler, and dreaded the inevitable results of the policy that he was pursuing; the clergy were against him to a man, and it was only in deference to the expressed wishes of certain exalted personages that a revolution had been staved off so long. What was certain was that the coming revolution would have a very different and much more decisive outcome than the last. And perhaps it was in order to remove any patriotic misgivings which this Englishman might be expected to feel that so much stress was laid upon the perfect disinterestedness of Russia in the matter. Russia, he was assured,

fully recognized the independent character of the races whom she had freed from the Turkish yoke, and there was no greater mistake than to suppose, as many people did, that the Bulgarians, by reason of their long enslavement, had not in them the makings of a nation. Another very great mistake was the time-honoured belief that Russia coveted Constantinople; and it was shown to him by arguments which he did not quite follow that the possession of that city would be a source of weakness, not of strength, to the great northern Empire which was charged with a desire to shift its capital to the shores of the Bosphorus. The infidel, it was true, would be eventually driven out of Europe, that was what every intelligent man must perceive; but it was desirable for the peace and security of all the European nations that a small State, guaranteed by the greater ones, should be placed in a position of such geographical importance. Well, the Greeks had been tried and found wanting; it was now the turn of the Slavs; and although the establishment of a Slav kingdom might still be somewhat distant, England, not less than the other Powers, was interested in working towards that solution of the thorny Eastern question.

To all this Archie assented with a good deal of indifference. He could not have fought against his own countrymen, but there was not the slightest danger of his being called upon to do that; and as he was sure to be dead and buried long before a general war could break out, he felt justified in disregarding considerations of high politics. From what particular pattern of rifle the bullet might be discharged which would relieve him of all further participation in earthly quarrels did not seem to him to signify very much. Only he wished that his death-warrant might be made out with as little delay as possible.

One morning, his banker, whom he had been obliged to inform of his whereabouts, forwarded him a batch of letters, amongst which was the artless effusion penned

by Bobby Dare. Archie was greatly touched by it; for he knew very well what the sentiments and aspirations of his correspondent had once been, and indeed no secret was made of these.

"I have loved Cicely Bligh ever since I was a small boy," wrote Bobby, "and I suppose I may look upon myself as an unusual example of constancy; but she never took me seriously, and she never will. That doesn't prevent my loving her still, and wishing her to marry the man whom I believe she loves. If it is a race between you and Chetwode, I know whom I want to win."

Other extracts from this letter have already been quoted. Of course Archie could not be influenced by it; but it softened his heart, and brought the tears into his eyes, though he judged it best to return no answer.

"After all there are some really good fellows as well as a lot of consummate rascals in this wretched world," he thought. "Chetwode may be a rascal, and I shouldn't be much surprised if he was; yet I don't see how he could have dealt differently with me. If I had been in his place, I suppose I shouldn't have allowed Cicely to marry the man who had caused her brother's death. And if he wishes to marry her himself, he has a right to try. I don't believe she'll take him, though. I'd rather think of her as married to that honest fellow Bobby."

But even this prospect, somehow, could not be contemplated with any approach to cheerfulness or resignation. The unfortunate man was young and full of health and strength. His feelings had been dulled by the terrible calamity which had come upon him; but time was beginning to do its work, and this well-meant missive acted upon him like an irritant, causing all his wounds to ache and throb with intolerable pain. He could not help asking himself whether it was possible that Cicely really loved him; he could not help wonder-

ing whether it was true that women, when they love, are willing to forgive everything. He could forgive her anything, he thought, forgetting that he had not been very ready to forgive her for desiring to manage her own property in her own way.

Upon the summit of the hill of Pera, near the British Embassy, there is a small public garden, whence a wide view of the city may be obtained. Thither Archie wandered, and, after reading his letter over again and replacing it in his pocket, indulged in dreams which he well knew to be only dreams. No! he could not now go back and "face his trouble," as Bobby advised; but there was no harm in speculating upon what might conceivably happen if he did go back. All sorts of happy and improbable events are conceivable, and perhaps we can't do better than console ourselves by conceiving them, because they very seldom come to pass, nor, even when they do, does the reality often prove as pleasing as the vision. So for a time Archie pleased himself or pained himself—which it was he hardly knew—by imagining that Cicely's arms were round his neck and her head on his shoulder, that she was telling him she did not doubt a word of his story, and asking him how he could have been so cruel as to fancy that she would.

"Oh, here you are!" said a voice behind him. "They told me you had walked up in this direction."

"Who told you?" asked Archie, turning round. "The man who watches me?"

Theodori laughed.

"You do not like being watched?" he asked. "For my part, I am so accustomed to it that I don't mind it—indeed, I look upon it as a sort of protection. Well, if you never do anything worse than sit in a garden and gaze at a superb view, you will soon cease to be spied upon."

"I didn't know there was a view," answered Archie, dejectedly. "Now that you mention it, I daresay it is superb; but I think I would rather be looking down

the mouth of a cannon. Is there to be a meeting to-night?"

Theodori nodded. He seemed to be a little nervous and excited, and as he lighted a cigarette, while seating himself upon the bench beside his companion, it was noticeable that his fingers trembled slightly.

"Something has been decided!" exclaimed Archie, upon whom these signs of agitation were not lost.

"Well—I think so," Theodori replied; "but you will be told to-night. When all is said, it is what you asked for," he added, almost roughly.

"Death is what I asked for," said Archie, and it was with some surprise at himself that he experienced a sudden sensation of faintness. "I shall be only too thankful if it is coming at last."

"Oh, you fool!" exclaimed Theodori, "you poor, silly young fool! Do you know that you are as white as chalk? There!—never mind; I know you are no coward. And you must go on now—I can't save you. Ah, why wouldn't you be advised by me while there was still time?"

It may have been fancy; but there certainly seemed to Archie to be a suspicious humidity in the eyes of this middle-aged scamp.

"You have been very kind to me, Theodori," he said simply, "and you must not distress yourself about me now. It is quite true that death is what I asked for, and death is the only good thing that anybody can give me."

"Well, you may come out of it safe and sound—who knows?"

"But that would be a little ridiculous, wouldn't it? No; if anything in the world is certain, it is certain that I shall not return from this expedition. By the way, what sort of expedition is it, and what are we supposed to be going to do?"

"My dear friend," answered Theodori, "you are aware that I am only an instrument, like yourself. I

know very little, and what little I know I must not talk about. Only—I am sorry."

Archie looked at the man's face, which was not a bad sort of face, as faces go, and which just now expressed nothing but kindly commiseration.

"I didn't mean to tell my history to anybody," he said; "but I will tell it to you, I think. Then you may be as sorry for me as you please, but at least you won't be sorry when you hear that I have been killed."

So he related as succinctly as he could the chain of circumstances which had brought him to his present strait, and when he had finished, Theodori, who had listened attentively without interrupting him, said:

"You have been very unlucky, my poor boy; but you have also been unnaturally foolish, and I am afraid you have played into the hands of our friend Chetwode —*qui n'est pas sot, lui.*"

"Oh, I don't deny that I behaved like a fool," answered Archie, "although I couldn't suppose that anybody had seen the scuffle between me and my cousin. Anyhow, you understand now why it was out of the question for me to return to England."

Theodori assented meditatively.

"Yes, you are self-condemned in every sense; your story would never be believed after the way in which you have acted. Yet you might very well have lived on and been as happy as ever again in the course of a year or so. *Si jeunesse savait!* But it is useless to talk in this way; and, as I said just now, you may not be going to die this time."

"It will be no fault of mine if I don't," answered Archie.

"Well, you had better be prepared for it, at all events, and that is what I came up here to say to you. Have you any instructions to give me? Have you made a will?"

"I never thought about that," Archie confessed. "I suppose, if I die intestate, my money will go to my

cousin, who doesn't want it; perhaps I might think of somebody else to whom it would be more useful." Then he added, smiling: "I'll tell you what, Theodori, you shall be my heir. You aren't well off, you know, and you have often said to me that you dreaded the prospect of old age. With what I can leave you, you will be able to live comfortably and amuse yourself, and drop this conspiracy business."

But Theodori started back, throwing out his hands.

"Not for worlds!" he exclaimed, vehemently. "I wouldn't touch it! You think that is a funny thing for an unscrupulous pauper to say? But don't you understand that it is my fault—that it was I who—well, they questioned me about you, and I repeated what you had said. I wish to God I had held my tongue!"

"My dear fellow," returned Archie, "if you have made these people believe what I have been trying to drive into their heads all along, you have done me the greatest service in your power. Why should you object to my making some return for it?"

No representations, however, could overcome the determination of this inconsistent vagabond to refuse the fortune offered him.

"You must think of some other poor man," he said. "Heaven knows there are plenty of them! And when you have written out the document, you had better go to your Embassy or to your banker's, and have your signature attested; for obvious reasons it would not be very safe for me to act as your witness. Now I have no more to say, and I am going away. Till to-night, then."

So here was another good fellow, in the skin of an adventurer. In truth this world, sad and chaotic as it is, is inhabited for the most part by beings who are neither very bad nor very good, and the distance which separates the best of us from the worst is not so great but that we can join hands across it. Archie was going to leave this world and go he knew not whither;

that much was certain and inevitable; so that there was no harm in his feeling a queer, yearning, brotherly sort of love for the fellow-sinners of whom he was about to take an eternal farewell. And possibly it may have been a half-conscious wish that somebody at least should think kindly of him after he was gone, that made him bequeath all he possessed to Bobby Dare. Bobby, at all events, had been kind and generous to him, and Bobby, poor fellow, had neither money nor expectations. It was as good a way as another of disposing of one's cast-off clothing.

When Archie had executed his brief testament and had had his signature duly witnessed, he returned to his hotel, where he wrote a long letter to Cicely, in which he narrated the whole truth about himself. However, after he had finished it, he tore it up; for what was the use of distressing her? She would hear that he had been killed in battle, and she would be sorry for a time, and then she would be consoled. That was better than that she should remember him in connection with a tragedy which had ended in virtual suicide.

That night, as the doomed man entered the dingy little room in which he had spent so many weary hours, he saw that all eyes were turned upon him, and that in all of them there was an expression of curiosity and pity. Theodori appeared uneasy and gave him a quick glance, which he interpreted to mean that he must show no sign of being prepared for what was in store for him. He accordingly seated himself with his accustomed air of languid dejection, and as soon as some preliminary business had been disposed of, the fat, bald-headed personage who usually presided over these deliberations, addressed him in slow, laborious English:

"Mr. Bligh, it has been determined to give you immediate employment. I am to tell you that the Society attaches great importance to your mission and

counts upon your obedience. To-morrow—do you see? —you will take the steamer to Varna. On arrival, you will report yourself to M. Natchikoff, whose address is here written out for you. From him you will receive further instructions, upon which you will act without delay. Also he will tell you what measures it may be possible to take for your personal safety. I am to remind you—but that is perhaps not necessary —that, should you fall into the hands of our enemies, you are to die rather than make any compromising revelations."

Archie said he quite understood his orders, and immediately afterwards the conclave broke up. Everybody shook hands with him on wishing him good-night, which was a departure from previous custom. Theodori, from whom he parted at the door, declined his invitation to accompany him home and smoke a cigar, answering hastily:

"No; not to-night, thank you. I detest farewell conversations. Nevertheless, I shall be on board the steamer to-morrow to see the last of you."

CHAPTER XLIII.

MUTINY

THE Austrian Lloyd's steamer which carried the mails from Constantinople to Varna, and which until recently afforded the only direct means of transit between the Turkish capital and civilization, was, as it usually is, inconveniently crowded, and Archie, on taking his passage, was warned that all the available berths had been bespoken long before. However, the weather was fine and still, and he was quite willing to take his chance of a snooze on deck. There are circumstances which deprive even sea-sickness of its terrors, nor can

it greatly signify whether one dies with or without a cold in one's head. Archie leant over the side and watched, though he scarcely saw, the embarkation of the passengers, which was being effected from small boats amidst that hubbub of shouting, shrieking, and chaffering familiar to all who have visited eastern and southern ports. He was wondering whether Theodori would keep his promise of coming to say good-bye, and hoping that he would, although it seemed far more likely that he would not. For Theodori made it a rule never to incur any discomfort that could be avoided. He had to put up with so many compulsory discomforts, he was wont to say, that he would feel it unfair to himself to add voluntary ones to their number, and of course it is an uncomfortable thing to take leave of a man who has been sentenced to death.

But at the last moment, when Archie had quite given him up, he hove in sight, and, jumping out of the kaïk which had brought him, ran briskly up the companion-ladder. And evidently he did not intend that his farewell should be of any solemn or emotional character.

"Well, old fellow," he said, cheerfully, "so you've done with this deadly-lively place—and not sorry for it, I daresay. You're going to have a splendid passage. Got everything you want?"

"I suppose so," answered Archie, smiling. "My wants are not numerous. I'm sufficiently armed, if that is what you mean."

"Oh—well, yes; that's desirable, of course. They take very good care of you on board these steamers: you'll get a better dinner than you could get at that filthy Pera hotel."

But although he went on talking in this way, as though his friend had been merely starting upon a pleasure excursion, it was easy to see that he was not thinking much about what he was saying, and he kept glancing towards the bridge, where the captain had

already stationed himself, and whence orders might be expected at any moment that all who were for the shore should sdirkaembe. Whn at length those orders were issued, and when a general movement in the direction of the side had begun, his manner suddenly changed.

"Bligh," said he, taking Archie by the hand, "I don't think we shall ever meet again in this world, and if there is another world somewhere, it isn't very likely that you and I will be quartered in the same part of it. So now there are three things that I should like you to remember, if you can. Firstly, that I am not a free agent; secondly, that I tried to persuade you to go home—and it would have been a ticklish business for me if you had consented, I can tell you; thirdly, that I wouldn't take any legacy from you, though nobody wants money more badly than I do. Bear all this in mind, and perhaps you will be able to say to yourself, 'Well, the man wasn't altogether a scoundrel, after all.'"

"My dear fellow," answered Archie, "I have had nothing but kindness from you from first to last; and if you mean that it was you who got me told off for this job, whatever it may be, I can only say, as I said yesterday, that you couldn't have done a kinder thing."

"Well—and there was something more that I wanted to remind you of. You have bound yourself to be obedient, and you will have to stick to your word. You must think of your superiors as you used to think, I suppose, of some old red-faced English general. It wasn't for you to criticize his tactics, though you might not approve of them. Your duty was simply to do as you were told; and that is your duty still. When you have seen Natchikoff, you will understand what I mean: nothing short of a miracle can save you. Good-bye."

He was gone before any rejoinder could be made,

nor, after he had once more seated himself in his kaïk, did he turn his head, though Archie watched him out of sight and was ready to give him a last wave of the hand. Archie himself was not in the least disturbed by that clear intimation that the end of his life was near. He had understood as much from the outset, and, except during that passing moment of physical weakness which has been mentioned, he had not shrunk from his fate. As the vessel moved slowly out of the harbour and then began to steam ahead at full speed between the sunny shores of the Bosphorus, his feelings were rather of peace and relief than of anxiety. A soldier's death is surely the best of all deaths, and many an unhappy wretch who is driven to blow his brains out would welcome it thankfully enough. Besides, anything is better than suspense.

The weather fulfilled its fair promise; the tempestuous Black Sea was found to be in one of its rare moods of quiescence, and at break of day the steamer cast anchor in the roadstead of Varna. Archie, who had passed the night on deck, dozing at intervals, saw a line of low, bare hills, dotted over with white houses, which the first rays of the rising sun threw into relief. He and the other passengers were placed on board large, heavy boats which might almost be called lighters, and, as they were being pulled slowly towards the unprotected shore, he thought to himself what a pleasant time they would have had of it in an easterly gale. On the jetty a crowd of some thirty or forty persons was assembled, and as soon as he stepped on land one of these, a perturbed-looking little man with a waxed grey moustache, singled him out.

"Mr. Bligh?" he said, interrogatively, as he raised his hat.

"That is my name," answered Archie. "Perhaps you are M. Natchikoff?"

"Yes, yes," answered the little man, hurriedly. "You have arrived early; you have abundance of time

before the train starts. What luggage have you? Only that bag? So—that is well! You had better walk up to the railway station with me. I would invite you to breakfast at my house; but the circumstances are such—you understand? For the sake of my family, I must not risk it."

He spoke very fair English; but he was in such a state of nervous excitement that it was impossible to get any intelligible information out of him.

"There is no hurry—there is no hurry!" he kept repeating, in answer to Archie's requests for instructions. "I have a paper for you which I will deliver to you presently, when we shall not be observed, as we are now. It is most unfortunate that so many people have seen us together. Yet it was better that I should meet you than that you should ask your way to my house. And I would wager that those people at Constantinople have done nothing to ensure my safety. You have not brought a letter of introduction to me from your Embassy—no?"

"Of course not," answered Archie, smiling at the idea.

"I thought not! Such a simple precaution, and so easily taken! Many Englishmen bring introductions to me; I show them the neighbourhood and the site of the British camp before the Crimean war. That is quite natural. But those people treat me like a dog; they have no consideration for me."

It was evident that M. Natchikoff was a good deal more preoccupied with his own affairs than with those of his charge. His complaints were prolonged without intermission until he had reached a secluded spot, a long way from the railway station, when he cautiously drew an envelope from his pocket and thrust it into Archie's hand.

"There!" said he, "that will tell you what you have to do."

But, as Archie was about to break the seal, "No!

no!" he almost shrieked; "I will not have it—I will not permit it! I desire to know nothing of the contents of that letter; you will be so good as to open it after you have entered the train and started on your journey."

"Very well," answered Archie, rather amused; "but at least you will have to tell me for what place I am bound. Because I don't know."

"For Rustchuk, of course. Is it possible that they did not inform you of that?"

"They informed me of nothing; I only know that I have been honoured with a commission which is likely to cost me my life. Perhaps, as we are quite alone, you would not object to saying whether you think that a general rising in the country is at hand."

"A rising? That may be—or again it may not be. We get no direct news from Sofia here, and I am not instructed to say anything to you upon the subject. But," added M. Natchikoff, with marked reluctance, "I was to ask you whether you had provided yourself with a revolver?"

Archie pulled up his waistcoat and showed the weapon which was attached to his belt.

M. Natchikoff drew a long breath of relief.

"Then I am not under the necessity of furnishing you with firearms," he observed. "It was a very dangerous thing to ask me to do—very dangerous, and very inconsiderate on the part of those who suggested it. Now, as to that letter; it must be altogether destroyed. I suppose—perhaps you would not like to swallow it, after reading it?"

"Well, if you ask me, I don't think I should," replied Archie. "Moreover, if there are other people in the railway carriage, as there probably will be, they might think it a little odd that I should make my breakfast upon my correspondence, might they not?"

"Then your best plan will be to burn it; many people burn their letters. In any case, it should not

be allowed to exist for one moment longer than is absolutely requisite. Now, sir, I have performed my duty, and I must appeal to your good feeling to excuse me from accompanying you to the railway station. I am a married man, with a large family which depends entirely upon me for support; I hold at present a small office under the Government, and——"

"Oh, *I* don't want you to accompany me," broke in Archie, rather uncivilly—for he thought that conspirators and revolutionists ought at least to be free from poltroonery—"if you will point out the way to me, I have no doubt I shall be able to follow your directions."

M. Natchikoff at once agreed, and, after doing as he was requested, vanished with amazing rapidity. Archie got a cup of coffee and some dry bread in the scantily provided refreshment-room, and then took his seat in the train, where, as he expected, he was soon joined by half a dozen other travellers. Taking stock of these gentlemen, he came to the conclusion that, whatever their respective vocations might be, they were not detectives; so that as soon as the so-called express had started on its deliberate journey, he drew the envelope which M. Natchikoff had given him out of his pocket and tore it open.

It contained a half-sheet of type-writing, which was without date or signature, but which stated its purpose in language devoid of any ambiguity. When Archie had read it through, he fell back in his seat and the colour left his cheeks. He was not exactly surprised: because he had had suspicions which he had endeavoured to put away from him. Nevertheless, he was horrified and disgusted. For it seemed that there was no question of a *coup de main* at Sofia or elsewhere, and that his services were required, not as a leader of irregular cavalry, but as a simple assassin. There was a man in Bulgaria whom he had often heard mentioned in the course of those Constantinople con-

ferences which had wearied him so profoundly, and whose name he had seen more than once in the English newspapers. In foreign countries, this man passed, rightly or wrongly, for being an honest patriot. He was, however, notoriously anti-Russian in his sympathies, and it had been decided by those best qualified to judge that his "removal" was a matter of urgent necessity. Archie, therefore, was instructed to remove him; and the manner in which this act of justice was to be accomplished was set forth clearly and tersely. The man was to be at Rustchuk that afternoon; he was expected to deliver a speech on laying the foundation-stone of some new public building. It would be easy enough to approach him either during or after the ceremony, nor would there be any difficulty about putting half a dozen bullets in his body. For the instrument of Nemesis to effect his own escape would, it was admitted, be rather difficult; still it was not impossible that he might slip away in the confusion, and he was told whither to betake himself in the event of his contriving to elude the police and the populace. Finally, he was cautioned that, if captured, he was to refuse to say a word in answer to any questions that might be put to him.

While Archie slowly tore this document into small pieces and dropped the fragments, one by one, out of the window, he reflected upon his position, and tried to arrive at some decision as to the course which it behoved him to adopt. One thing was quite clear and certain; he could not obey his orders. It is true that he had sworn obedience; but he had never intended to swear that he would disgrace himself; and when one has to choose between breaking one's oath and committing a cold-blooded murder, there is noting for it but to break one's oath. He now understood Theodori's compunction and self-reproach.

"What infernal blackguards these fellows are!" he thought indignantly. "I daresay they haven't the

slightest objection to stabbing an enemy in the back; but surely, if they had a grain of intelligence, they might know that a gentleman doesn't do such things."

Well, there was no use in getting angry about it; the question was, what was to be done? Of course, the hope of meeting with a soldier's death must be abandoned; probably there had never been any chance of its being fulfilled.

"However," said Archie to himself, "they will no doubt have me 'removed' when they hear that I have played them false, and I am sure they are heartily welcome."

It was perhaps his duty to return to Constantinople and deliver himself up to his fellow-conspirators, to be dealt with as they might think fit; but he really did not feel that he owed it to them to take all that trouble. If they had not realized that he cared not one straw about them or their plots, they ought to have realized it. He had given them to understand that he was willing to die for them in any honourable fashion, and he was willing to be executed now if they should deem it worth while to execute him; only, in that case, they must be good enough to instruct some emissary to do the deed; he would, at any rate, not attempt to put himself out of their reach. As the train wound its slow way between the flat-topped hills of Bulgaria, he pondered over the total collapse of his scheme, and, in spite of himself, could not help a certain sensation of light-heartedness at the reprieve granted to him by circumstances. It was as evident to him as it had ever been that there was no place for him in this world, yet possibly it may be true that

> No life that breathes with human breath
> Has ever truly longed for death,

and the knowledge that it was impossible for him to die in the manner that he had anticipated did not come to him altogether as a disappointment.

Shortly after midday the frontier town of Rustchuk was reached, and here the conductor of the Orient express came to ask him whether he wished to engage a place in the sleeping-car for Vienna.

"I daresay I may as well," he answered, with a short laugh.

Certainly he could not remain where he was, and he had decided not to retrace his steps. He, therefore, with the rest of the passengers, stepped on board the little steamer which was waiting, and presently he was transported across the broad, turbid stream of the Danube, no man forbidding him. It was a queer and even a somewhat comical thought, that at that very moment the intended victim was probably declaiming to an appreciative audience in happy unconsciousness of the peril he had so narrowly escaped, while certain intriguers at Constantinople were rubbing their hands and saying to one another that all ought to be over by now.

From Giurgevo, on the Roumanian bank of the river, Archie despatched the following brief telegram to Theodori:

"Impossible to do as requested. Did not bargain for such business. Am going to the Grand Hotel, Vienna."

That he considered to be a sufficient explanation of his conduct and intentions. If these people should think it desirable to wreak their vengeance upon him, they would now know where he was to be found; but he resolved to have nothing more to say to a set of cut-throats who took such good care of their own persons and committed their crimes by deputy.

CHAPTER XLIV.

MR. LOWNDES'S LEGACY

IT is but too rarely that unassuming merit meets with any recognition in this bustling world; yet every now and then one is gratified by hearing of exceptions to the rule, and all Abbotsport was gratified to learn that a certain wealthy old lady had bequeathed a sum of two thousand pounds to her cousin, the Reverend Robert Lowndes, as a small token of esteem and regard.

"Though what she can have meant by 'regard,'" observed the Reverend Robert, on imparting this pleasant intelligence to his wife, "I really don't know, considering that I haven't so much as set eyes upon her for the last quarter of a century. Now don't say that that accounts for it, Maria."

"It is an old trick of yours, Robert," returned Mrs. Lowndes, "to put words into my mouth which I should never have dreamt of using; and you have the same unfair habit in the pulpit. You accuse your hearers (who can't answer you) of putting forward arguments that won't hold water for a moment, and then you triumphantly go on to demolish them. Far be it from me to deny that your cousin's regard for you would have increased if you had taken the trouble to call upon her once or twice in five-and-twenty years. Then she might have made it four or five thousand, instead of two, and we could have put up a nice memorial window to her in the south transept."

"With our actual legacy, we shouldn't be justified in going to that expense, you think?"

"Nobody could expect it. But what I do think we are fairly entitled to is a holiday, and a very small part of this windfall ought to enable us to go abroad for six weeks or two months, and travel comfortably. How many years is it since we were out of England?"

The Rector sighed.

"Upon my word I don't remember. Enough for me to have forgotten all I ever knew of foreign languages, anyhow, and you were never very fluent, except in your own, of which I admit that you have a fine command. Don't you think that, at our time of life, the Lakes, or Scotland, would be more suitable than Switzerland?"

"Who wants to go to Switzerland?" cried Mrs. Lowndes. "We have been there once already—and it is about the only place that we *have* been to. No! I see at a glance what can be done without undue extravagance—Paris, South Germany, the Tyrol, Venice, and possibly Florence and Rome. I shall expect a new travelling costume when we start, and a plain but handsome dinner-dress on our return. Those two gowns are all that I ask for myself; the rest of the expenditure will be entirely for your benefit. You require a complete change of air and scene, Robert; you know you do. I wouldn't say anything about it so long as I knew that we couldn't afford it; but now I must insist upon your doing what is right."

"And how about one's neglected parishioners?"

"They will appreciate you all the more when they get you back again. Besides, none of them are in urgent need of you just at present."

Mr. Lowndes smiled, as he stroked his chin reflectively. He rather liked the idea of this proposed jaunt, and he felt he had earned it.

"Well," said he, "perhaps I might be spared for a few weeks; I'll think it over. But in all seriousness, Maria, there is one parishioner of mine whom I don't half like leaving, and that is Cicely Bligh. It strikes me that she may be in urgent need of a word in season before long."

"But would she listen to it? I confess that I am out of patience with Cicely, patient though I am. She is as good a girl as ever lived in some ways; but any one more obstinate and opinionated I never met. If she

chooses to marry that Chetwode man, she will do it—and it won't be for want of my having warned her that he is after her money. *My* conscience is quite clear in the matter."

"No doubt it is a great thing to have a clear conscience," agreed Mr. Lowndes. "I am not sure that mine would be clear if I didn't do all I could to prevent such a marriage. Somehow, I don't trust Chetwode, and I am by no means satisfied that he doesn't know more than other people about Archie Bligh's reasons for leaving Abbotsport."

"Oh, dear me,!" exclaimed his wife, "we all know what *those* reasons were."

"I am aware that you all think you do; but I am unable to adopt your views."

"That is because Madame Souravieff flattered you and bamboozled you. Everybody else saw through her."

"Well," said the Rector, musingly, "if I go away, I shall at all events leave one man behind me who has a head upon his shoulders. Bobby Dare sees as plainly as I do that the popular theory is absurd, and I think he may be trusted to keep a sharp eye upon our friend at Upton Chetwode. A good fellow that, and a loyal fellow too. It isn't every young man who would trouble himself to work as he is doing for an absent friend."

"Oh, he is working for an absent friend, is he?" said Mrs. Lowndes, laughing. "If he is, he must indeed be a paragon of a young man, considering that he himself is over head and heels in love with the girl."

"Do you think so?" asked the Rector, dubiously.

"Do I think so? My dear Robert, have I a pair of eyes? You, of course, have none—or at least you might as well have none, for any use that they are. Now I will just tell you this, and if you don't believe me, I shall not be surprised. Cicely never cared a button for her cousin; she doesn't care much for Mr. Chetwode, and she might come to care for young Dare if he were

not such a simpleton. However, he will certainly ruin any chance that he may have if he lets her see that he is interfering with her affairs."

Perhaps that discovery did not imply any extraordinary amount of shrewdness on the part of Mrs. Lowndes, and in truth Cicely had of late been greatly annoyed by the reports which had reached her of Bobby's activity and of the inquiries he had been prosecuting right and left. That he should dislike and distrust Mr. Chetwode was a comparatively venial offence, though he might have no adequate excuse for so doing; but it was taking a little too much upon him to assume that she wanted Archie to be dragged back by the hair, and in spite of her having said and wished that Bobby would get over his own boyish attachment, she could not think the better of him for having fulfilled her prophecy so expeditiously. She was, besides, the more provoked with her former adorer by reason of a certain respect which she could not help feeling for him. He was no longer a boy, but a full-grown man—very quiet, very resolute and self-reliant, after a fashion which was not inconsistent with modesty. He did not obtrude himself upon her notice, and as he never mentioned the subject, she could not very well tax him with the officiousness of which she knew him to be guilty. She did do her best to snub him; but this was not much of a success, and after one of her sharp speeches, somehow or other it was always she herself, not he, who felt small.

Now, what is to be done when a friend of whom better things might have been expected sees fit to conduct himself in an unpardonable manner? Obviously one must be driven to fall back upon such sympathy as may be obtainable elsewhere; and Mark Chetwode's sympathy was of a peculiarly soothing and delicate kind. It was evidently real; it was never put forward in the shape of unasked-for advice, and it could always be counted upon, even when it was not expressed. For Mark, who knew that he had no surer ally than time,

was playing his cards very well indeed. He was under no illusion as to Cicely's feelings; he was aware that she was not in love with him and that she would undoubtedly refuse him if he asked her to be his wife; but he was also aware that she was beginning to rely more and more upon his support in a thousand little ways; and one great element of security was that, if she did not love him, she did not love anybody else. His object was to make himself indispensable to her, and he quite hoped that he was succeeding.

"I shall miss you dreadfully when you go away," she told him one afternoon.

They were walking across the park; for she had, as usual, encountered him in the course of her afternoon walk, and it had come to be an understood thing that when this happened he should see her home.

"It is kind of you to say so," he answered, with a smile. "But am I going away?"

"I don't think you will be able to stay all through the winter; you haven't enough to occupy you. And you are not one of those men who can always be happy so long as they have plenty of sport."

"Added to which, I could not have it if I were. Nevertheless, I hope to remain where I am."

"Are you really growing fond of Upton Chetwode at last, then? I used to preach to you that it was your duty to reside upon your property, do you remember? But you didn't seem to be convinced of it, and now I am not sure that it is your duty after all. It can't be anybody's duty to bury himself alive."

"Shall I confess the truth?" he asked. "I hate Upton Chetwode, and I have a constitutional aversion to doing my duty. I suppose that if I were a sensible man I should be in St. Petersburg at this moment."

"Why?" asked Cicely.

But she obtained no answer, and possibly required none.

"I doubt," said Mark presently, "whether you could

find anywhere another man at once so hopeless and so contented as I am."

"I don't know why you should be either. It is absurd for you to talk of being hopeless; yet perhaps you have no business to be contented with the life that you are leading here. I think you ought to go out into the world again."

"Ah, then you shouldn't tell me that you would miss me if I did."

It was not often that Mark permitted himself such innuendoes, and he hastened to qualify his ejaculation by adding:

"I have very few friends. Most men, I daresay, would think it only natural that their absence should be regretted; but to me it sounds like an extravagant bit of flattery. Perhaps, after all, it is rather presumptuous of me to speak of you as a friend of mine."

"I should be abominably ungrateful if I were not your friend," Cicely declared. And seeing in the man's eyes a wistful look, which was not feigned, she was moved to speak with more warmth than was perhaps quite prudent. "I am like you," she went on; "I haven't many real friends. There is my aunt, who is as kind as she can be, but with whom I have scarcely a single idea in common; then there is Mr. Lowndes, who treats me as if I were a wilful child; and there is Bobby Dare, who—who is tiresome and irritating in many ways. I think that must end the list, and you are the only one of the four who never rubs me the wrong way."

"That is something," observed Mark, laughing slightly. "It is a negative merit; but when one has no positive merits——"

"You have the positive merit of being straightforward," returned Cicely—and if this was not a very happy hit, it was at least effective, since it made her queerly constituted companion feel both grateful and

ashamed—"you neither do nor say shabby things. You are not for ever suspecting your neighbours of unworthy motives, and I notice that when you dislike them you generally hold your tongue about them."

"Perhaps that is only because I am so worldly-wise, though. I have lived long enough to know what a worthless weapon calumny is; and if I wanted to prejudice you against—let us say—against our friend Mr. Dare, I don't think I should begin by telling you that in my opinion he was a scheming hypocrite."

This certainly seemed to be a temperate and dignified enough fashion of signifying that he was cognizant of Bobby's proceedings, and a comparison between the two men could hardly at that moment be to the advantage of the latter. Cicely did not say much more, for the subject was not an easy one to discuss; but she allowed it to be inferred pretty clearly that no calumnies would injure Mr. Chetwode in her estimation, and when she reached home, where Mr. Lowndes had been for some time patiently awaiting her return, she was not at all in the mood to be influenced by representations which that excellent man had felt that he ought to make to her before absenting himself from his parish.

"You don't give me credit for a grain of common sense!" she exclaimed. "Admitting that I can't see quite as far into a millstone as you and Bobby Dare, it still doesn't follow that I am an absolute idiot. If Mr. Chetwode harboured the designs which you are so kind as to attribute to him do you really suppose I shouldn't have discovered them by this time? And if he wanted to supplant Archie, do you think he would have considered it necessary to remove him from the place by fair means or foul?"

"Well, yes, I do," answered the Rector. "My belief is that you would have remained faithful to Archie if he had remained faithful to you."

"Thank you; and perhaps you are right. You allow that he has not remained faithful, then?"

"No; only that he has been somehow or other made to appear false. It's no use talking, Cicely; nothing will ever persuade me that the poor lad threw you over for the sake of Madame Souravieff; and if that wasn't his motive, what was it?"

"It would be interesting to know."

"I think it would. And until I did know, I wouldn't accept another man out of wounded pride, if I were you."

It would hardly have been possible to say a more foolish thing. Cicely repressed her wrath; but she answered coldly that she was afraid she would have to use her own judgment, such as it was, in the matter of accepting or refusing any man who might honour her with an offer of marriage. All the more so, because the judgment of her advisers seemed to be a little cloudy, notwithstanding their singular ingenuity. And although Mr. Lowndes was morally certain that he was right, he could not produce an atom of proof in support of his allegations; so that all that he could do was to shake his head and hold his peace, and trust in Providence.

"I don't wish to hurt your feelings, Robert," observed his wife, by whom he was duly catechized that night; "but I must say that it strikes me as a merciful thing that you are going to take your holiday just now. And if the Admiralty would find some employment for the other Robert and send him away, I daresay Cicely wouldn't marry Mr. Chetwode after all. It was right to warn her—I did so myself—but then I only told her that he was after her money, which is true, and ought to be obvious. I wasn't quite such a goose as to suggest that he had hatched some dark plot for disposing of young Bligh!"

CHAPTER XLV.

ARCHIE'S SENTENCE

IT seemed a strange and unreal thing to Archie Bligh that he should be crossing the plains of Roumania without molestation andin a comfortable railway carriage, like any ordinary traveller. He had become so accustomed to the sensation of being constantly watched that he could hardly believe there was no emissary of the Society to which he had sworn fealty at his elbow, and it was difficult to realize the facility with which he had refused the part assigned to him. Emissaries, to be sure, might be found in or despatched to Vienna; but somehow he could not think of these people very seriously or imagine them to be the desperate characters that they represented themselves as being. The solemn emptiness of those conferences at Constantinople, the ludicrous terror of poor M. Natchikoff, the evident lack of any concerted plan of action—all these things came back to his mind and produced a strong impression therein that he would hear no more of insurrections or assassinations. And this was scarcely such a disappointment to him as it ought logically to have been. He had done his best to get himself killed: it was no fault of his that he had been unsuccessful, and now it only remained for him to devise some other means of getting rid of an existence which instinct or early training forbade him to take with his own hand. By hook or by crook he must manage to die; that was certain. Yet the prospect of a few weeks or even months of life was rather sweet than bitter.

He thought a good deal in a fitful, disconnected way, about the past and the future while the train sped on through Roumania and Hungary, and he slept during the greater part of the night. By daybreak he had pretty well made up his mind what he would do.

"I'll give them a chance to put me out of the way," he thought; "that is the least that I can do, after throwing them over. But if they haven't taken advantage of their opportunities at the end of ten days or a fortnight, I shall consider myself entitled to make a move, and I believe that India would be the best place for me. A man who habitually goes out tiger-shooting on foot ought not to defraud his heirs of their inheritance for very long, and while he lives he will have grand sport to keep him from brooding over what can't be cured."

The remembrance that he had an heir made him remember Bobby Dare's letter; and perhaps it was the fresh lease of life which he had taken that gave him a greater interest in that missive than he had hitherto felt. Could it be possible that Chetwode had deliberately recommended him for an enterprise which must of necessity prove fatal to the man who should carry it out? He recollected very well that he had spoken upon the subject of assassinations to Mark, and that he had received no assurance from that cautious personage that he would not be employed in such dirty work. But then he also recollected what Mark had said—that a girl could not be permitted to marry in ignorance the man who had brought about her brother's death. Mark was in any case free from risk of interference on the part of the luckless wretch in question; so that there was no need to suspect him of sinister designs. Yet the fellow had a treacherous face; it was horrible to think of him as Cicely's husband.

Archie determined that he would think no more about the calamity which he was powerless to avert—and, as a natural consequence, he found himself quite unable to think about anything else. Meanwhile, time and the express hurried steadily on. Pesth was reached; then came the green meadows and wooded hills of Austria, and then Vienna and the end of the long journey. Archie installed himself comfortably at the Grand Hotel; one may as well be comfortable when

money is no object and when one has the prospect of speedily relinquishing all one's earthly possessions. However, when he had spent three days in that bright city, which is in some sort the Paris of south-eastern Europe, and had neither received any response to his telegram nor been stabbed in the back during his nocturnal wanderings, he began to feel that the prospect had receded indefinitely, and to experience a return of the unreasonable exultation which had come upon him when he had first perused his instructions. He was well aware that there was not and could not be any hope for him; but for all that he was glad that he was not going to die immediately. He was glad, too—and this, at all events, was permissible—that he had freed himself from the stupid conspiracy into which he ought never to have blundered.

One evening he was sitting in the courtyard of the hotel smoking his after-dinner cigar, when a light touch upon his shoulder made him start, and, turning round, he saw Theodori looking down upon him with a grave face.

"You here!" he exclaimed. "Did you get my telegram?"

"Naturally I did," replied Theodori; "that is why I am here. You have placed yourself and me in a painful position, Bligh."

"Sit down," said Archie, "and have a cigar. Well, if it comes to painful positions, you and your friends wanted to place me in a tolerably nasty one. I can't think how you can ever have imagined that I should accept it. I was perfectly ready to take part in any fair fighting, and I asked nothing better than to be killed in the course of it; but I suppose the fact of the matter is that fair fighting has never been contemplated."

Theodori had lighted his cigar. He blew three or four successive clouds of smoke from his lips before he replied:

"I believe that there will be fighting; but whether there will or not isn't a question for you and me. We have simply sworn to obey orders."

"No doubt; but you see, there are certain orders which one *can't* obey. At least, I can't. All I can say is that your bloodthirsty friends have my full permission to assassinate the defaulting assassin. Only I rather question whether they have the requisite pluck."

Theodori did not smile.

"If you think that these men are merely conspirators *pour rire*, you are making a great mistake, Bligh," said he. "I do not know that they are all specially courageous; but I know that they cannot afford to be defied or disobeyed. It was not wise of you to send this telegram; you would have done better to travel straight through to England."

"Oh, very likely. But even if I had been anxious to preserve my skin, I couldn't have refused to let those fellows have a fair chance of making a hole in it."

"They will take advantage of your chivalrous sentiments," answered Theodori, dryly. "It is perhaps unfortunate for you, but it is certainly fortunate for me, that you happen to be chivalrous. I need hardly tell you that they hold me responsible for you."

"I am sorry for that," said Archie; "but I don't quite see what right they have to do any such thing."

"Well, as I told you at Constantinople, it was I who recommended you for this piece of work which you have failed to execute. The thing had to be done—it still has to be done—and it wasn't easy at the moment to find a man who could be trusted to do it. For several reasons I regretted afterwards that I had mentioned your name; but I own that distrust of you was not one of them. I knew you wouldn't like it; but I believed that you would do it. Well, we need not argue about the righteousness or unrighteousness of assassination; you have your ideas and I have mine; neither of us would be likely to convince the other.

But this is the offer which I have been sent here to make to you—and I beg you to believe me when I say that it is a great concession and one which I only obtained as a concession to myself. The man whom you were ordered to remove is now at Sofia; he takes no precautions, and by following him you can easily do what you ought to have done at Rustchuk. Your hope of escape, slight as it would have been in the first instance, will be almost nothing there; but that is your own fault. I am commissioned to give you this opportunity of atoning for an act of mutiny. Will you take it?"

"Most certainly not," answered Archie, composedly.

"If you don't, you will never leave this place alive. Ridiculous though it may seem to you, it is nevertheless a simple fact that I myself shall be put to death unless I carry out the instructions that I have received, and those instructions are to make you obey or to kill you. They are not pleasant instructions; but that is neither here nor there, I shall carry them out, because I do not believe in any future state of being, and because I would kill anybody rather than die."

This was said in so calm and matter-of-fact a tone, despite the incongruity of such a declaration with the place in which it was made, Archie could not doubt the speaker's seriousness. He only answered:

"Very well; I shall offer no resistance. I can't think how you will manage it, though, even if I give you every help in my power. The Viennese police system is said to be the most perfect in the world."

"Ah, bah! It is not the police who will give me any trouble. Yet you might help me in one way, Bligh; you might consent to meet me in duel, instead of forcing me to murder you. I suppose you know that, although I would murder you if I felt it to be necessary, I should never be able to forgive myself for having done it. A duel is different. A distinction without a

difference, you may say; but to me the difference is as real as anything in this confused world."

To Archie the whole business seemed unreal enough. However, he assented without hesitation to Theodori's proposal, merely asking, with a laugh, what they were to quarrel about and where they were to find their seconds. Before replying, Theodori made a final and earnest appeal to him to reconsider his decision. A man who has sworn implicit obedience to others, cannot, he urged, be held answerable for any act that he may commit. The responsibility rests with his superiors; he is merely an instrument. Moreover, if death must be faced it is surely better to accept the fatal stroke from some stranger than to force an unwilling friend to deliver it. But these and other representations proved totally unavailing.

"Nothing on earth would induce me to obey such orders," Archie declared. "I am sorry that you should have a disagreeable duty to perform; but I can't relieve you of it. Now you may as well tell me what I am to do."

Theodori, who a short time before this had called for two glasses of beer, suddenly straightened himself in his chair and said in a loud, ringing voice:

"I will have no more to do with you, sir. You are a fool, and I believe you are also a coward." He added rapidly: "Throw your beer in my face!"

Archie promptly complied; and Theodori, without another word, rose and left the house, wiping his face with his handkerchief as he went.

There was a little stir and commotion among the spectators, two or three waiters came up, and presently the manager of the hotel advanced and stood staring in an undecided way at the Englishman, who continued to smoke his cigar imperturbably. Nobody, however, addressed him, nor, perhaps, did anybody feel that the incident was one which called for interference. Brawling, of course, could not be permitted; but these two

strangers seemed disposed to settle their differences in a proper and decorous fashion.

Archie remained where he was, presuming that he would soon be informed what was the next step which he would have to take; and indeed he had not been waiting an hour when two very respectable gentlemen entered the courtyard, and, taking off their hats to him, presented him with their cards, which bore names of a Slavonic appearance. They had been informed, they said, that he was without friends in Vienna, and it had been represented to them that they would render him a service by acting on his behalf in the unfortunate affair which had occurred between him and M. Theodori. Should he feel disposed to trust his honour to their hands, he might be sure that that flattering confidence would not be misplaced.

Archie had hardly finished thanking them before two more cards were handed to him, followed by their owners, Counts Petrowics and Paulowsky, who, it is needless to say, were the bearers of a challenge from their esteemed and grievously insulted friend M. Theodori. When they had been courteously received and duly referred to MM. Adreivics and Ivanovics, with whom it appeared that they had already had the pleasure of being acquainted, it was intimated to Archie that he would do well to await the result of the conference in his own room. He accordingly withdrew, and very soon afterwards his seconds joined him, with the information that their efforts to avert a hostile encounter had not been crowned with success. Consequently a meeting would take place in a secluded glade of the Prater at six o'clock the next morning. The weapons chosen were pistols, and it had been agreed that only two shots should be exchanged. They said they hoped that that was satisfactory to him, and he replied that nothing could be more so.

Upon the whole, it was satisfactory to him—and yet he was sorry for himself. As he lay awake in the dark

(for he only slept by fits and snatches that night) he thought of his short life, and the good times that he had had, and the follies and sins of which he had been guilty, which were not so very numerous. He thought, too, of Cicely, whom he had loved so dearly and who had loved him so little, and of Madame Souravieff and her perfidious sympathy, and of Mark Chetwode and his equivocal behaviour; and how could he help thinking that he was about to lose life and fortune and everything through a stroke of almost laughable bad luck? If he had clutched a tuft of grass, instead of seizing a tipsy man's legs, he would even now have been one of the happiest fellows alive. Ah, well! there is no denying that Providence or chance plays some queer tricks with the destinies of helpless mortals.

But Archie, if he was not a philosopher, was at all events a gentleman, and at daybreak he rose and dressed himself, prepared to meet death, as every gentleman should. He found his seconds waiting for him outside the hotel with a hired carriage; he was driven with them through the silent streets and down the long alleys of the Prater, where the dew was heavy upon the grass and birds were twittering in the trees. Presently he was invited to alight, and was conducted on foot to a wooded dell where four men were standing, engaged in conversation. He recognized Theodori and his two friends, and somebody mentioned that the fourth person was a surgeon, at which announcement Archie smiled. The services of that functionary are not likely to be called into requisition, he thought.

The distance was measured out—surely it was a very short one! the antagonists were placed in position; then a handkerchief was dropped, and Archie instantly fired into the air. The next second he started, staggered forward a few paces, crossed his legs and fell heavily upon his face, with his arms stretched out before him.

A brief consultation followed between those who

were legally responsible for what had happened. Theodori had burst into tears, as men of his nationality are apt to do upon comparatively slight provocation; but he was not allowed to indulge his emotions long. His friends seized him, one on each side, and hurried him away, while the doctor remained kneeling on the grass, with his hand upon the heart of the victim.

CHAPTER XLVI.

MR. LOWNDES'S HOLIDAY

FEW things in the world are more discouraging than to find—as every unselfish person is sure to find sooner or later—that it is worse than useless to meddle with the mismanaged affairs of one's neighbours. Bobby Dare and Mr. Lowndes, animated though they were by the highest and noblest motives, had not made a striking success of their interference between Cicely and Mark Chetwode, and they were now feeling proportionately discouraged. Bobby, whose letter to Archie had, of course, remained unanswered, and who, despite all his efforts, had been able to obtain no further information bearing upon the mystery which so exercised his imagination, was almost in despair. He had the melancholy satisfaction of seeing Cicely on most days of the week, which was perhaps a shade better than not seeing her at all, but he was made to feel that he was in her black books, he was given no excuse or occasion for speaking again to her as he had spoken immediately after his return, and possibly he would not have put in such frequent appearances at the Priory had he not been compelled in self-defence to make some show of continuing to pay his addresses to one by whom it was as clear as daylight that they would never be tolerated. For both his mother and

his sister persisted in patting him on the back and telling him to go in and win. For the sake of a quiet life it was best not to argue with them, and for the same reason it was unadvisable to tell them—what, nevertheless, seemed pretty certain—that Mark Chetwode was going to have things all his own way.

Mr. Lowndes was not yet quite convinced of that, but he could not feel very sanguine as to his own powers of influencing the obstinate patroness of his benefice. Before handing over the control of parish matters to his curate, he thought it only right to seek another interview with Coppard and strive to relieve a troubled conscience of its burden; but Coppard, who had been sharply spoken to and thoroughly frightened by Mr. Chetwode, was now resolved to be guilty of no further indiscretions.

"Not me, sir," said he, when the Rector, after vainly beating about the bush for some time, accused him in plain words of knowing more than he chose to tell about Archie's unaccountable abdication and flight. "'Tis well known as I ain't done nothin', nor yet wouldn't do nothin', to injure Miss Cicely—not if 'twas ever so! And what can have put such thoughts in your 'ead, sir, the Lord alone He knows. Which is what I often says to the missus after one o' your sermons, sir. They're too deep for the likes o' me!"

"I suppose that is why you so seldom give yourself a chance of listening to them. But you know, Coppard, however fond you may be of Miss Cicely, you had some reason, or fancied you had some, for bearing a grudge against Mr. Archie."

Coppard replied with a good deal of dignity that he was not that sort of man at all. It was very true that young Mr. Bligh had proposed to deal with him in a harsh and unjustifiable manner, but young Mr. Bligh was not his landlord and never would be. He could afford to disregard calumny, and he always did disregard it. Moreover, he really didn't know how a

poor fisherman was to drive a rich gentleman out of the country even if he wanted to do such a thing.

Mr. Lowndes, not knowing either, had to desist from cross-examining this recalcitrant witness; but when he went to say good-bye to Cicely, he felt it his duty to try the effect of a last appeal upon her.

"I know I am going to make you angry," he said; "but I am old enough and wise enough not to care whether I make you angry or not. I can't leave this country without cautioning you once more that you are in danger of committing an act of folly which you will repent for the rest of your life. I am not denying your right to think what you please about Archie, and of course, until he vouchsafed some explanation of his behaviour, he had only himself to thank if you assume that he has fallen in love with another woman—although he hasn't. But now, I put it to you as a reasonable being: Is that a sufficient reason for your marrying somebody else, whom you don't really care for?"

"Oh, no, I shouldn't think so," answered Cicely; "but then I wasn't aware that I was going to marry anybody else."

"Well, my dear, you are thinking of it, and so is he. Mrs. Lowndes says you will do just what you choose, and I daresay she is right. All I implore of you is to look well before you leap. Chetwode may be a trustworthy friend, though I confess that I am inclined to doubt it: but from friendship to love is a long step, and if you haven't taken that step yet, be advised by me and keep yourself well in hand while you can. We none of us know very much about him, remember."

Cicely, who thought she knew a good deal about him, did not consider it worth while to say so. In her heart of hearts she knew that Mark loved her; but how could she discuss the possibility of her accepting

a man who had manifested no intention at all of proposing to her?

She, therefore, contented herself with remarking that she had no doubt whatever as to Mr. Chetwode's trustworthiness, and that she was well aware of how inevitable it was that any bachelor friend of hers should be set down as her suitor.

"It is a pity," she added, "that you can't manage to dislike him without bringing such far-fetched accusations against him; but that, after all, is a great deal more your affair than his or mine. Probably he would only be amused if he heard them."

Mr. Lowndes could say no more, and felt that he had done unwisely in saying as much. It was with a heavy heart that he took his leave and with sad misgivings that he started for the Continent on the following day.

"I don't feel as if I should enjoy this trip a bit, Maria," he could not help saying out of the fulness of his heart to his wife, as he sat opposite to her in the railway carriage. "Cicely Bligh is as dear to me as if she were my own daughter, and I am afraid she is going to make the most fatal mistake that a woman can make."

"Would your staying at home have prevented that?" asked Mrs. Lowndes, pertinently. "One can't stop people from doing foolish and fatal things; it's only when the things are done that they come to us and ask for help."

"Yes," sighed the kind-hearted Rector; "and that is just what makes one doubt sometimes whether one ought to be thankful for existence. Our judgment is worth nothing where we ourselves are concerned, and we are powerless to save others, because they won't listen to us. My feeling is that, if I were what I ought to be, they *would* listen to me—and they don't."

But a man whose digestion is in good working order can scarcely contrive to be a pessimist, and when Mr. Lowndes reached Paris he began to enjoy himself, not-

withstanding the excellent reasons that he had for being in low spirits. It was very natural that so thorough a change of scene and surroundings should cause him to forget the worries connected with an English country parish, and, as a matter of fact, he was more oblivious of these than was his partner, whose sharp eyes were for ever restlessly searching the Rue de la Paix and the Rue de Rivoli and the gardens of the Tuileries in quest of somebody whom they could not discover. On the last day, however, Mrs. Lowndes's viligance was rewarded. She and her husband were driving back from the Bois de Boulogne, when near the *Rond-point* in the Champs Elysées they were passed by a smart victoria, in which was seated a lady whose features had recently become familiar to the inhabitants of Abbotsport.

"There she is!" exclaimed Mrs. Lowndes excitedly. "Look! Look!"

The Rector whisked round in time to see that the victoria had been brought to a standstill, and that Madame Souravieff was smiling and beckoning.

"Shall we go and speak to her?" he asked.

But Mrs. Lowndes had already answered the question by jumping out; and presently they were shaking hands with their former neighbour, who expressed much surprise at meeting them there and a good deal of anxiety to hear any local intelligence that they might be able to give her.

The interview, which did not last long, was a rather disappointing one to Mrs. Lowndes, for all her queries and insinuations failed to elicit from the Russian lady the admission which she had hoped for. Madame Souravieff looked perfectly innocent when she was informed that Archie Bligh's friends were in perplexity as to what had become of him, and she had the effrontery to say that if, as they conjectured, he was abroad, she hoped he would come to Paris and find her out.

"All the same," Mrs. Lowndes declared, as she resumed her place in the fiacre beside her husband,

"that young man is here. Of course she wouldn't take him out driving with her. I wish we weren't going away to-morrow."

"If you are right, Maria," answered Mr. Lowndes, "we should gain nothing by proving you so; and if you are wrong, as I think you are, we should do better to prosecute inquiries elsewhere."

But it was with little hope of hearing anything about Archie Bligh that this staunch friend pursued his journey to Strasbourg, Munich, and other German cities, and when he reached Vienna, and took up his quarters at the Grand Hotel, he was less preoccupied with home affairs than with the questions of alternative routes to Venice and of whether the autumnal rains would have rendered the Tyrol an uncomfortable place of sojourn for tourists or not. He was sitting in the court-yard with a map spread out upon the table before him, in the very same spot where Archie had received Theodori's challenge, when he became aware of a stout, bearded personage, who, with straight legs and heels drawn together, was making him a low bow.

"The Reverend Lowndes, I believe?" said this Teutonic stranger.

Mr. Lowndes jumped up, ducked his head, and looked interrogative.

"Your name has been seen in the list of arrivals," went on the other, "by a patient of mine who is very ill in this house, and who would like to speak with you. He has begged me to seek you out and to mention his name—Mr. Bligh."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Mr. Lowndes, "is it possible that you can mean Archie Bligh? What an extraordinary thing? Of course, I will go and see him at once. You don't think him dangerously ill, I hope?"

The doctor shook his head.

"Your friend is more than dangerously ill," he replied; "his life cannot be saved. We have found it

impossible to extract the bullet, and even if we could have done that, I do not think that we should have kept him alive. The left lung is perforated, and, what is worse, there is no vitality in the system. I fear he must sink in a few days."

"The bullet!" exclaimed Mr. Lowndes—"what bullet? How did he manage to get a bullet in his body at all?"

"Now—that is no difficult matter," answered the Viennese doctor, smiling. "He has perhaps trodden upon the foot of the other chentleman—what do I know? To me it was more important to get the bullet out than to ask how it found its way in; but, as I have told you, it was not possible to perform any operation."

"Oh, a duel, eh? Dear me, what a sad business? Who could have picked a quarrel with him? Some foreigner, of course. Not—not a Russian count, I hope?"

"No, not a Russian. I have understood that the chentleman was a Greek, and that the affair was political; but this I cannot say certainly. My business was only to attend to the one who should fall."

"You were present at the duel, then?"

The doctor nodded.

"I was requested to be present; and I may tell you that I am sorry to have given my consent, for I have had trouble with the police about it. I have concealed nothing of what I know from them, and I will conceal nothing from you, sir; but I know very little. Until the day of the duel I was acquainted neither with your friend, nor with his adversary, and the other persons concerned in the affair have left this country for the present—it was only prudent on their part to do so. Mr. Bligh took no aim, he fired into the air, and at once fell, as we all believed, dead. But when I found that he still breathed, it was my duty to do all in my power to save him, and you may be sure that no measure has been neglected. Unhappily, our efforts

have failed, and yesterday I was obliged to tell him that he must prepare for the end."

Mr. Lowndes sighed.

"It is a sad business," he said.

"Yes," assented the other, who seemed to have that sort of kind-heartedness which so many Germans have, and which is not incompatible with considerable thickness of skin; "yes, it is sad to see any young man die. But from what he has told me, I think he is not anxious to live, and when one is not anxious to live——" Here the doctor raised his shoulders and spread his hands expressively.

"Has he spoken to you about himself and—and his affairs?" inquired Mr. Lowndes.

"No, he has spoken very little. I am not inquisitive, and besides, while there was any hope, it was necessary to keep him from talking. Now, however, it is of no consequence. Nothing can do him any harm, and I think he will die more happily after he has seen you. It was only by chance that I read out to him the names of some of his countrymen who had arrived at the hotel, and as soon as he heard yours he begged me to seek you out and send you to him. It is very possible that he may have something upon his mind, and that you may be able to relieve him."

"Ah, I'm afraid it's too late for that. Is there absolutely no hope?"

"Absolutely none. You would not perhaps understand me if I told you the medical details; but he is in reality a dead man already. Will you come now to his room?"

"Of course I will," answered Mr. Lowndes; and so he was conducted upstairs to a bedroom on the second floor, the door of which was opened by a Sister of Charity, who closed it behind her and stepped out into the passage after the doctor had said a few words in German.

"We shall leave you together," the latter said; "you

will be more at ease so. If anything should happen to make you want us, you will be so kind and ring the bell."

CHAPTER XLVII.

LAST WORDS

MR. LOWNDES advanced into the room, where a man whom he would never have recognized as Archie Bligh was lying in bed, propped up by pillows. The unfortunate young fellow was as emaciated as if he had had a long illness; his beard had been allowed to grow, his cheeks were as white as marble, and his features had the pinched look which is the forerunner of death. He turned his head slowly and smiled, holding out his hand.

"Oh, my poor boy!" exclaimed the honest Rector, with tears in his eyes; "I would rather have lost my right arm than found you like this."

"You needn't be sorry for me," Archie answered; "it's all right. Everything has happened just as I wished, except that I wasn't killed on the spot; and now that you have come, I am very glad I wasn't. What a piece of luck that you should have turned up in Vienna, of all places, at this moment!"

He spoke with some difficulty and his breathing was laboured; but he seemed to be quite composed and in full possession of his faculties.

"I'm thankful to have found you, and I shall be still more thankful if I can be of any comfort to you," answered Mr. Lowndes, mournfully enough; "but I can't be thankful to see you as you are. Why should you have wished it? What made you fight this duel?"

"Well," replied Archie, "I believe I shall do no harm if I tell you. There are certain things to which I have sworn secrecy; but your hearing the main facts will injure nobody, and it won't take many minutes to relate

them. Find a chair for yourself and sit down. If I faint or anything, you had better ring for the nurse. She'll know what to do. I may as well begin by saying that that duel was really an execution, and that I only got what I suppose were my deserts by being executed. Before I left England I joined a secret society, which I mustn't particularize, and my belief was that I was to be employed in some sort of soldiering work—in raising an insurrection, in fact. However, that wasn't the view of my employers, and when I got orders from them to assassinate somebody, I could only refuse."

"I should think so, indeed!" ejaculated the astonished Rector. "A nice set of scoundrels they must be! What on earth could have tempted you to join them, Archie?"

"You shall hear presently. Of course, after disobeying their commands and breaking my oath of allegiance, I was bound to let them punish me in any way that they might think fit——"

"I don't see that at all," interrupted Mr. Lowndes.

"Well, I thought so, and I think so still. Added to which, my one wish was to get rid of life. Death, as you can easily understand, is the only punishment that they ever inflict, and they sent a man here to kill me. As he was a good fellow and had been a friend to me, he naturally didn't like the job; so to make it less unpleasant for him, I made a pretence of quarrelling with him and accepted a challenge from him in due form; and—and then he didn't quite shoot me through the heart. I daresay," added Archie, meditatively, "that his hand was a little shaky; for I have seen him practising with a pistol in a shooting gallery, and a better shot I never met in my life."

"Ah, dear me!" groaned Mr. Lowndes; "I wish he had been a worse one—or that he had had a conscience!"

"Oh, he has a conscience right enough. He did his duty according to his lights, and he certainly thought

that I had failed in mine. Personally, I shouldn't like shooting a deserter; but I might have had to do it, you know, in old days. I'm glad to say that I can die without any ill feeling against these fellows; though I doubt whether they are much use. Anyhow, they have answered my purpose; so I have nothing to complain about."

"You mean, I suppose, that they have done for you what you would have hesitated to do with your own hand. But, my poor dear fellow, why did you want to throw your young life away? I'm very much afraid that you have been cruelly deceived by somebody."

"No, the deception has been on my side. Now, Mr. Lowndes, I am going to confess the whole truth to you if I can; but you musn't interrupt me, please, or I shall never get through. I daresay you remember that I left the Priory for Aldershot on the night when Morton met with his death. Well, it was I who killed him."

Mr. Lowndes could not suppress an ejaculation, notwithstanding the request which had just been made to him.

"Yes," Archie went on, "I killed him, though I was as innocent as you are of any intention to commit murder. It was very bad luck. I missed my train, and while I was wandering about, waiting for the next one, I met Morton, who had just heard of my engagement to his sister, and who was drunk and abusive. He began by trying to get up a row with me; but of course I wouldn't have that, and as I took him by the arm to get him safely past the cliff—because he was reeling all about the place—he first pretended to be very affectionate and then did his best to shove me over the edge. The end of it was that he did shove me over, and if I hadn't been brought up short by a narrow shelf of rock I should certainly have been dashed to pieces. I wish to God I had been! However, I didn't know what was to come; so I made a desperate struggle for life, and he stamped on my

hands to make me loosen my hold, and then I caught him by the legs and he fell and rolled over the brink. That's the whole truth. I'm sure you won't think I would tell you a lie on my death-bed."

"I should not have suspected you of telling a lie at any time," answered Mr. Lowndes, as Archie paused and sank back gasping for breath. "Why did you not say this before?"

"Because I didn't think I should be believed. It doesn't sound like the truth, you know. I was sure that nobody could have seen what had happened; so I went on to Aldershot, and when I was sent for I tried to look as much horrified as every one else was at the accident. It wasn't straight or honest, I quite admit that; but—well, the long and the short of it is that I couldn't bear to lose Cicely. And it stands to reason that I should have lost her if I had confessed to her that I had killed her brother."

The Rector shook his head.

"Cicely would have believed you and stood by you," he said.

"No; she didn't love me enough for that. I think one would have to love a man very much before one could accept such a story and marry him in the face of the outcry that would be raised against him. I don't deny that I was wrong; but I'm not sure that I wasn't wise. Anyhow, I was punished; for it turned out, after all, that the whole scene had been witnessed by old Coppard, who was in the woods—poaching, I suppose. He kept it dark for a long time; but at last he blurted it all out to Chetwode, and that was final. The only thing left for me to do was to get out of the place and break off my engagement, and—and find somebody accommodating enough to put an end to me."

If poor Archie had been sound and well, Mr. Lowndes might have felt it his duty to scold him a little; but as matters stood, he could not bring himself to do that, and only said sorrowfully:

"It *was* Chetwode who persuaded you to go, then?"

"Not exactly. I had made up my mind to go, and all he did was to give me introductions to people who seemed likely to put me in the way of being decently killed."

"I daresay he was willing enough to do that."

"Perhaps; I can't tell for certain. He has kept my secret, and I think he may have been disinterested; though Bobby Dare, from whom I had a letter not long ago, doesn't, and I presume, from your face, that you don't either. If it hadn't been for Bobby's letter I shouldn't have made a clean breast of it to you—it wouldn't have been worth while. But now I think that Cicely ought to know the truth, and I want you to repeat all I have said to her. Then she can judge for herself. And will you tell her, please, that I never loved, and never could have loved, any one but her. I mention that because Bobby wrote some nonsense about Madame Souravieff, which she may have believed."

Archie's voice had been growing weaker and his articulation less distinct. He now closed his eyes, and Mr. Lowndes, after twice speaking to him and receiving no reply, thought it better to ring the bell. The doctor and the nurse at once appeared; and the former, when he had administered a restorative to his patient, said:

"I will ask you to leave him now, sir." He added in a lower tone: "Later in the day, if there should be any change—you would perhaps wish to be at hand—yes? I am obliged to go away, but the nurse will call you if necessary. I think, however, that he has probably a day or two left to live."

All this time Mrs. Lowndes had been waiting impatiently for her husband to escort her to the Imperial Picture Gallery and the Schatzkammer; so that when he appeared she had some incisive remarks to make upon the selfishness of unpunctuality. As soon as she had heard his excuse, however, she became as sympathizing as could be desired and wanted to make some

beef-tea immediately, because she was sure that no foreigner understood these things. But the Rector said:

"I'm afraid it isn't worth while, Maria. The doctor told me there was no hope, and indeed I could see that for myself. It has been a most deplorable affair. If only the poor lad had had sense enough to speak the truth at the outset!"

"But even if he had, Robert, I don't see how Cicely could have married him. It seems that he really did cause the wretched man's death, though he did it unintentionally."

"Under all the circumstances, I shouldn't have regarded that as an insurmountable obstacle, and I don't believe that Cicely would either—if she really loved him."

"Only, as I have so often told you, she didn't. I am ready to acknowledge that I have maligned him, and to heap ashes upon my head; but I know I am right about her."

"It does not much signify now," observed Mr. Lowndes. And then, after a pause: "I think we shall have to go straight home as soon—as soon as it is all over."

Mrs. Lowndes's face fell a little; but she was a worthy woman, in spite of some small weaknesses, and she answered submissively:

"Well—if you think so, Robert."

"I might write," said her husband; "but upon the whole I would rather convey this news by word of mouth than by letter. What I dread is that Cicely may engage herself to that man Chetwode, and if once she were to do that, she would be very apt to shut her ears and stick to her word."

"But has he done anything disgraceful? I suppose he would say that, when he heard the truth, he did the most friendly thing that could be done. He didn't give information, and he helped the unfortunate man to escape."

"Yes, yes; but I don't like that assassination business. If he didn't actually instigate it, he must have known what was likely to happen and what the inevitable consequence would be. Unless I am very much mistaken in her, Cicely won't marry him after hearing this story. Anyhow, I should never forgive myself if I left any stone unturned to save her from him."

This good couple had not the heart to go sight-seeing that day, the remainder of which they spent in their bedroom, drearily enough, awaiting a summons which did not come. But late in the evening somebody tapped at the door, and the doctor put in his head.

"There is no immediate danger," he said; "but if you have anything more to say to your friend, it would be well that you should go to him now. The Sister tells me that his mind has been a good deal wandering. To-morrow, perhaps, he would not know you."

The Rector, of course, hurried to Archie's bedside, and found him quite composed and rational; but in truth there was little more to be said. The dying man had a few messages to send to his friends, and for the rest he was ready and willing to accept the last consolations of religion. Happily for him, his faith was of that unquestioning order with which the majority of our countrymen are blessed. Like a true Briton, he had always hated the labour and misery of connected thought, and he was humble enough to believe that the creed which had commended itself to his forefathers was good enough for him. He had led much the same sort of life as other young men lead—not much better and certainly not any worse. He was sorry for the sins that he had committed, and glad that he had never been guilty of conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman; and he was not afraid to die.

"I funked it a little bit some time ago," he confessed simply; "but now I don't seem to mind. It's all right."

A plain man like Mr. Lowndes could only hope and believe so. If Archie Bligh was not "all right," then

assuredly nine-tenths of us must be all wrong; and although that is perhaps the orthodox doctrine, it is a very hard one for good-natured folks to swallow.

The night passed without much perceptible alteration in the patient's state; but towards morning he became delirious, and, as the doctor had anticipated, he never recovered consciousness. Within twenty-four hours of the time when he had made his confession to Mr. Lowndes, he died, leaving behind him at least one person to whom his death appeared in the light of a calamity.

But Mrs. Lowndes, after shedding some natural tears, said that perhaps it was all for the best.

"You see if he had recovered there would inevitably have been complications. It isn't as if Cicely really loved him; and supposing that she had married him without loving him, they would both have been miserable. It seems almost a pity that she should have to be told this tragic story."

"She is certainly going to be told," answered the Rector with decision. "We will start for England as soon as we have buried our poor lad; and meanwhile I have telegraphed to her, merely saying that her cousin has been killed in a duel here, and that I am coming home to give full particulars. They hurry things over so these countries! The doctor tells me we shall be able to leave in a couple of days."

This forecast of the doctor's proved, however, to have been somewhat over-sanguine. Within the specified time all that was mortal of Archie Bligh had indeed been laid in the cemetery; but the police gave a good deal of trouble, and many formalities had to be gone through before Mr. Lowndes was permitted to take possession of the papers and effects of the deceased. Not until after the lapse of ten days was the harassed and impatient Rector able to take his place in the Cologne express, and as during that time he had had no news of Cicely beyond a brief acknowledgment of his telegram, he was by no

means as easy in his mind about her as he could have wished to be. For after all, the mere fact of Archie's death would hardly be enough to prevent her from accepting the hand of Mark Chetwode.

"She can throw the man over, though," Mr. Lowndes consoled himself by reflecting; "and it shall be no fault of mine if she doesn't."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

MADAME SOURAVIEFF HEARS SOME GOOD NEWS

ANYBODY who has ever committed an act of self-sacrifice —and most of us, it may be conjectured, have been guilty of that folly once or twice—must be aware that only after the deed has been done does the shoe really begin to pinch. We are willing to give up a very great deal for those whom we love, or what would our love be worth? And we don't want thanks or expect that the laceration of our feelings should be quite understood, and if we could only die and have done with it, perhaps we should die more or less happy. But we are not, as a general thing, required to die; we are merely required to part with a right arm, or a right leg, or some trifle of that sort, and when once the mutilation has been accomplished and the dreadful, inevitable reaction has set in, we are left to ask ourselves mournfully how we are to get through the rest of our existence in that maimed condition. It is not the loss but the process of growing accustomed to the loss that is so weary and so intolerable.

Thus it was that Madame Souravieff, after she had lightly pitched her wandering tent in Paris, was a restless and miserable woman. So long as she had felt sure of Mark's love, or at all events had only half doubted it, she had been able to amuse herself very

well when absent from him, and had found the world full of other interesting things and persons; but now that she had lost him, now that he was going to marry a woman younger and prettier than herself, the world assumed an altogether changed aspect, and it seemed to her that not one of its inhabitants except Mark was interesting at all. It was not that she had any lack of friends in Paris; for at the first approach of autumn all true Parisians are only too delighted of an excuse to hurry back to their beloved city, and there were enough ministers, ex-ministers, and future ministers on the banks of the Seine at that time to provide ample employment and diversion for a patriotic lady amongst whose schemes that of a Russo-French alliance had ever held a most prominent place. There were journalists, too, and literary men, besides plenty of her own compatriots, who had a respectful admiration for her. But the unfortunate thing was that they all bored her to death. Their conversation, which she had once thought so witty, struck her as laboured, stale, and artificial; she could not discover a conviction or an enthusiasm or an original idea among them; she wished them at the uttermost ends of the earth, *tutti quanti*, and yawned in their faces without so much as taking the trouble to put her hand before her mouth. This made them think all the more highly of her, but their forbearance did not inspire her with any sentiments of gratitude.

"I have been a perfect imbecile!" she kept saying to herself. "It is true that if it were to be done again, I should be a perfect imbecile again; still I have given up everything, and I shall receive nothing in return."

Nevertheless, one fine morning she did receive something which was totally unexpected, and which the religious feeling, which was quite strong and genuine in her, caused her to accept with tears of joy as a reward sent her by Heaven in return for her unselfish-

ness. This was no less glorious a piece of news than that of her husband's death, conveyed to her in a letter, dated Bad-Gastein, from the obsequious Victor.

"I have the profound regret," Victor wrote, "to announce to Madame la Comtesse that Monsieur le Comte expired two days ago, after an illness which for a fortnight past has left us no grounds for hope. I trust that Madame la Comtesse will acquit me of all blame in not having apprised her earlier of the melancholy circumstance. I was forbidden to do so; and being only a servant, I was compelled to limit myself to a respectful remonstrance. M. le Comte Paul, who was telegraphed for ten days ago, is here, and by his orders I am writing to say that Madame's presence at Gastein is considered desirable, for the discussion of family affairs. But should the journey appear too long for Madame, M. le Comte Paul will have the honour to meet her at any place between this and Russia which it may please her to appoint."

Madame Souravieff telegraphed to say that she would leave for Gastein by the first train, and made preparations for her journey without an instant's delay. Her mind was in a tumult of excitement, and she could not collect her ideas. All other considerations were overshadowed by the one great and blessed fact that she was free. Doubtless she might also be pretty nearly destitute; for her legal claim upon her late husband's fortune was only a modest one; but she could not bring herself to contemplate so mournful a contingency as that he should have left everything away from her. Only she knew that his brother Count Paul, with whom she had not been upon speaking terms for years, would surrender nothing to her that he was not obliged to surrender, and it certainly behoved her to accept the invitation sent her by that hostile personage.

Gastein is a somewhat inaccessible spot, and when at length she reached her destination she was ready to drop with fatigue. Nevertheless—for in the course of

her protracted journey she had had time to develop a good deal of uneasiness as to her financial position—she sent a message to her brother-in-law immediately on her arrival, to the effect that she would be glad to see him before retiring to rest. In obedience to this intimation, Count Paul Souravieff, a tall, straight-backed old gentleman, presently entered her sitting-room and bowed low. He said, with an ironical smile, that he could understand her anxiety, which perhaps was scarcely to be considered groundless; but that it was his pleasing duty to relieve it.

"I have thought it advisable, Madame," he added, "that before transporting the remains of my lamented brother to Russia, I should seek a personal interview with you, in order to explain clearly to you the conditions of his will, and to warn you that non-compliance with these will entail forfeiture of the revenues to which you will otherwise be entitled."

It now appeared that Madame Souravieff would be a very rich woman indeed, as long as she devoted no portion of her wealth to swelling the funds of secret political societies, and withdrew from all connection with any such society to which she might already have become affiliated.

"I am told," observed Count Paul, "that these stipulations may be difficult or even impossible for you to accept."

"No," answered Madame Souravieff, quickly.

"Indeed? I am glad to hear it, for your sake. It may perhaps occur to you that we have no means of ascertaining whether you keep to your engagement or not; but I feel bound to caution you that this is a mistake. The slightest breach of faith on your part will be promptly reported to us and as promptly acted upon."

"Oh, I am quite aware of that," Madame Souravieff replied with a laugh.

"Permit me once more to say that I am very glad,

for your sake, to hear it. I believe I have now told you as much about the provisions of my late brother's will as you would be interested in hearing."

"There are no further restrictions, then?" Madame Souravieff asked, after a pause "Nothing is said as to —re-marriage, for example?"

Count Paul, who had hitherto been irreproachably courteous, although he was not best pleased at parting with two-thirds of an inheritance which might have been his, forgot himself so far as to laugh outright at this.

"Reassure yourself, Madame," he answered; "not a word is said upon that most important point. I congratulate you upon the common sense, as well as the good taste, displayed by the question, and I have the honour to wish you good-evening."

Two days after this, Madame Souravieff left Gastein on her return journey to Paris, without having again seen her brother-in-law. Messages had been exchanged through Victor, and her offer to accompany her husband's remains to Russia had been declined on behalf of his family, although her right to do as she pleased in the matter had not been disputed. She had replied that it did not please her to insist upon a privilege so grudgingly conceded, and in truth she was thankful to be set at liberty. For her intention now was to make straight for England, and she was in a terrible fright lest she should reach that country too late to avert an irremediable calamity.

Two things comforted her and soothed her impatience on the way: she knew Mark's deliberate and cautious method of going to work, and she remembered how he had told her that she would always hold the first place in his heart. He had certainly said that he would marry her if she were free, and now she was not only free but rich. Of losing her riches she had no fear. She was not deeply implicated with the societies to which exception had been taken, and the duties which

she had assumed could easily be got rid of. It would be understood that she could be of far more service to the cause in a wealthy and independent capacity than by attending occasional councils and bringing no money to the chest.

She had proceeded as far as Munich, and was crossing the platform towards the refreshment-room in order to get some breakfast, when she almost ran into the arms of a burly gentleman in the attire of an English clergyman, who ejaculated "God bless my soul!"

"One would think we were playing hide-and-seek all over Europe," laughed Madame Souravieff. "One day I see you in Paris, another day in Bavaria! Is it permitted to inquire whither you are bound?"

"I am bound for home," Mr. Lowndes replied, with a grave face. "I am sorry to say that I have sad news for our friends there. I am sure that you, too, will be sorry to hear of poor young Archie Bligh's death in Vienna, from a wound received in a duel. By a mere accident, I happened to put up at the hotel where he was lying, and so was able to be with him at the last. Under the circumstances, I preferred going back to Abbotsport to finishing my holiday abroad."

Madame Souravieff was really rather sorry. Archie had wearied her a good deal; but, as will be remembered, she had objected to his being put to death, and had hoped, without much expecting it, that his life might be spared. "Poor young man!" she exclaimed. "Killed in a duel, you say? That seems odd. Are you sure that it was in a duel that he got his wound?"

"Did you think it probable that he would be wounded in any other way?" asked Mr. Lowndes, sharply.

"I know nothing about it. The last time that I saw Mr. Bligh he was in good spirits and had no intention of leaving England, so far as I was aware. I should have thought it improbable that he would find anybody to fight a duel with in Austria."

"Madame Souravieff," said the Rector, suddenly, "I daresay you will excuse my alluding to gossip which you may very likely have heard already. People in Abbotsport are under the impression that you had a good deal to do with Archie's disappearance——"

"The report was not worth contradicting," interrupted Madame Souravieff. "I am not much surprised at such things having been said; but there is no truth in them."

"I never believed that there was; and now I know that they were false. But what I believed all along, and now know to be a fact, is that your friend Chetwode was at the bottom of it. Is it taking a great liberty to ask whether you also are aware of that?"

Madame Souravieff shrugged her shoulders.

"It may be as you say," she answered. "If you know for a fact that it is so you know rather more than I do. Perhaps Mr. Bligh has confided something to you before he died?"

The Rector considered for a moment. He knew that the task which lay before him might not prove a simple one, and that Cicely would not necessarily take the same view of Mark's conduct as he did. No chance of securing an ally ought, therefore, to be neglected, and for several reasons he thought it quite possible that Madame Souravieff's co-operation might be obtained. If, as he rather suspected, she did not desire this marriage, she would probably be able to give useful information with regard to Mr. Chetwode's antecedents; if, on the other hand, she was in favour of it, no harm would be done by ascertaining her sentiments. The only question was whether he was entitled to reveal to her the circumstances under which Morton Bligh had met with his death. But as to this the Rector had already made up his mind that there must be no further concealment. Neither for Cicely's sake nor for the sake of Archie's memory was it desirable that Mark Chetwode and old Coppard should be left in a position to threaten dis-

closures. The truth must be told, and people must form their own conclusions about it.

Accordingly he said:

"If you can spare me ten minutes, I will be quite frank with you. My wife is in the refreshment-room, getting her breakfast, and I am supposed to be washing and shaving myself; so that we shall not be interrupted. To begin with, let me say in so many words that I am sure Chetwode means to marry Cicely Bligh, if he can, and that I suspect him of having designedly brought about his rival's death."

"You are certainly frank," observed Madame Souravieff, with a faint smile. "Pray go on."

Mr. Lowndes told his tale clearly and succinctly, as beseemed a man who had no time to lose.

"And now, Madame Souravieff," he concluded, "I daresay you will understand why I have taken you into my confidence. I want to open Cicely's eyes, and I cannot feel sure that they will be opened by the facts that I have mentioned, although to my mind those facts speak for themselves plainly enough. You see, we know very little about Chetwode, whereas you, I believe, have been intimately acquainted with him for years. If, therefore, you were disposed to give me any help——"

"Oh, I am on your side," interrupted Madame Souravieff, laughing somewhat tremulously. "I could help you, perhaps—there are circumstances—but I must have time to think: all this has come upon me so suddenly! You are going straight to Abbotsport?"

"Yes, we shall stop nowhere. I have already been delayed much longer than I had wished."

"It is not unlikely that I also may go to Abbotsport, for I wish to see Mr. Chetwode. Only it is absolutely necessary that I should spend a few days in Paris to buy mourning. I forgot to tell you that my husband is dead."

Mr. Lowndes began some conventional expressions of condolence, which she cut short unceremoniously.

"I am not afflicted," said she. "As you are aware, my husband and I did not live together, and you would not believe me if I were to feign regrets which I cannot feel. Still I must wear black for a time. Perhaps you had better tell Mr. Chetwode what has happened, and you may add—for I am sure he will be glad to hear it—that my husband has left me a great deal of money." After remaining silent for a moment, she asked, with the same uncertain sort of laugh: "Now do you understand in what way I can be of assistance to you?"

"Not quite," answered the Rector, wonderingly.

"Ah!—well, never mind. At any rate I am with you; and this I can promise: that marriage shall never take place. There are more ways than one of putting a stop to it; only the best and simplest way would be that she should refuse him. I think you might persuade her to do that without my aid."

"But suppose she has already accepted him?"

"In that case we should be obliged to have recourse to other measures. I do not believe that Mr. Chetwode is in love with her, I must tell you; and I do not believe that he was responsible, except indirectly, for that young man's death. But it is a matter of opinion, and you have a right to yours. Here comes your wife; I think, if you will excuse me, I would rather not stay and speak to her. We shall meet again soon."

And Madame Souravieff walked quickly away, leaving the Rector to explain his unshaven chin and unwashed face to his consort.

The revelation which had been made to Madame Souravieff disturbed her less after she had had time to reflect upon it than it had done at first. Mark had not told her the truth; but he might very well plead that he had not been authorized to do so, and as for his having taken advantage of an opportunity to remove

Archie from his path, that did not prove him to be in love with the girl whom he proposed to marry. In short, she would not let herself believe that it was possible to founder in sight of land. She had liberty, she had wealth, she had had Mark's own assurance that he still loved her.

"It is not an English schoolgirl who shall rob me of him now," she said to herself between her set teeth.

And yet she knew, as everybody knows, that in certain respects schoolgirls are a great deal more than a match for middle-aged women.

CHAPTER XLIX.

MARK IS SPARED A JOURNEY

THE telegram, announcing her cousin's death, which Mr. Lowndes had despatched from Vienna, not only shocked and grieved Cicely, but made her feel as if she were in some measure to blame for this catastrophe. In the presence of it she forgot her wrongs, and could have no more hard or contemptuous thoughts about poor Archie. She could only remember that he had loved her once with all his heart, and that if she had not retained his love, it was perhaps because she had been too dictatorial with him and too prompt in resenting the slightest tendency towards usurpation of authority on his part. It had, after all, been no such unreasonable thing that he should have wished to be allowed some voice in the management of her affairs, and had she been a little less unyielding he would probably not have been driven to seek for sympathy in another quarter. But her self-reproach and the excuses which she was able to make for Archie did not lead her to make any excuse for Madame Souravieff,

whom, in the absence of further information, she not unnaturally assumed to be the cause of the fatal encounter. She said as much to Bobby Dare, who had been greatly distressed by the news, which reached him through Miss Skipwith, and who took upon himself to reply that some other explanation would assuredly be forthcoming when Mr. Lowndes returned.

"Most likely he got into a row with some fire-eating Austrian officer," was his own conjecture. "And until I hear the contrary," he added, "I, for one, sha'n't believe that Archie ever saw that woman's face again after he left this."

"Perhaps you are right," answered Cicely, with unusual humility; "I am sure I hope so. Only, if you are, his having gone away at all becomes unaccountable."

"It will be accounted for when we get Mr. Lowndes back, I have no doubt," said Bobby. "Unfortunately that will be too late to make any difference now, though."

"It will make a very great difference to me if I find that I have been unjust to poor Archie," returned Cicely: "but I don't wish you to think that our engagement could ever have been renewed. If he hadn't broken it off, I should have kept to my word, because I told him honestly when I accepted him that I didn't love him in the way that he loved me; but I should never do such a thing again; I am quite sure now that it is a great mistake."

Bobby looked inquiringly at her, without replying. He could not help being pleased to hear that she had not loved Archie, yet his pleasure was neutralized by an idea which at once suggested itself to him. How had she found out that marriage without love is such a mistake? He had been wrong, it appeared, in supposing that she had cared for her cousin; might he not also have been wrong in supposing that she did not really care for Mark Chetwode? However, he had said all

that he intended to say against that inscrutable personage, so that he could only keep silence and hope for the Rector's return.

The Rector, as we know, had met with inconvenient delays at Vienna, and had refrained from writing because he had expected each day to be the last that he would have to spend in that city. Consequently there was plenty of time for Cicely to think over all possible explanations of the mystery, and for Mark Chetwode to communicate his personal impressions to her. He could not deny, when pressed to say just what he believed, that these were identical with her own; although he displayed a good deal of reluctance in making the admission.

"Of course, I know nothing," was his answer; "and to tell you the truth I would rather not know. But I suppose most people, on hearing that an Englishman had fought a duel in a foreign city, where he was a complete stranger, would be inclined, as I am, to say: '*Cherchez la femme.*'"

"Madame Souravieff is not unlikely to have been in Vienna, is she?"

"Well, she is often there. But I have not heard a word from her since she left this country."

"And her husband—is it not very possible that she may have met him there?"

Mark smiled.

"It is not very probable," he replied. "Count Souravieff does not meet his wife if he can help it. Moreover, he is an old man and an invalid. Finally, I doubt whether he would fight any duels for her sake."

"But if it was not Count Souravieff, who could it have been?"

"Really, I cannot tell you," answered Mark, after a pause. "But," he continued, hesitatingly, "I can easily imagine that there may have been somebody else. You see, Madame Souravieff has a great many friends

in various parts of the world, and—and one can understand that a quarrel may have arisen——"

Cicely stopped him with a slight gesture of disgust.

"Oh, well," she said, "we had better not discuss it any more until Mr. Lowndes comes. Then perhaps we shall hear the whole truth."

"Yes; that is much the best way," agreed her companion. "At present we can only guess—we know nothing."

Now, as a matter of fact, Mark knew a good deal, though not quite as much as he would have liked to know. News had reached him that his *protégé* had proved unfaithful, that he had been condemned to death as a traitor, and that the sentence had been duly carried out; but as to all details he was left in ignorance. His own belief and his very fervent hope was that the story of the duel was apocryphal, that Mr. Lowndes had either been misinformed or had invented it by way of breaking things gently, and that Archie had not been seen alive by his old friend. Still there was a possibility of the young man's having made a dying confession, so that it behoved survivors to be careful of what they said. If the worst came to the worst, he would be able, he hoped, to justify all that he had done; yet that the news of Archie's death should have reached his friends so promptly was from all points of view an untoward circumstance. One consequence of it which Mark speedily perceived was that it had, for the time being, completely checked the progress of his suit. Cicely might say that she would not discuss the subject; but it was evident that she could think about nothing else, and all his efforts to divert her thoughts into other channels met with only a passing success. He was thoroughly unhappy; because his love for the girl only increased as it became more and more plain to him that he had not yet won her heart.

One evening he had dropped in for a cup of tea at the Priory, and foolish old Miss Skipwith, as her habit

was, had gone out of the room to look for something and had not returned. Cicely, who was now growing seriously alarmed at the Rector's prolonged silence, confessed her uneasiness.

"Yesterday I couldn't stand it any longer, and I telegraphed to him," she said; "but no answer has come. What can have happened to him?"

"Would you like me to go and see?" asked Mark, smiling.

"To Vienna, do you mean? Oh, I could not ask you to do that!"

"Why not? I could be there on the fourth day, and I would at once send you a telegram. It is a very little thing to do. Besides," he added in a lower tone, "there is nothing in the world, great or small, that I would not do for you, if you asked me."

Cicely looked at him and remained silent for a moment.

"You are very kind," she murmured at length.

"Well, then," said Mark, rising, "that is settled. I will go home and pack a few things now. I shall catch the first mail from London to-morrow morning, and within about forty hours from that time I hope I shall be able to relieve your mind. Good-bye, Miss Bligh."

She gave him a grateful look as she held out her hand to him. He bent over it, just touched her fingers with his lips and was gone.

It was really very prettily done, and Cicely was as much touched by what he had refrained from saying as by what he had said. For of course she could not but understand how matters were with him, and she thought he had behaved very like a gentleman in observing such reticence.

Mark, for his part, had the satisfaction of feeling that he had scored a point. He was doing no good where he was, and he did not at all object to the journey to Vienna. On the contrary, he was rather anxious to have the first word with Mr. Lowndes. It soon

appeared, however, that that privilege could be secured without leaving the United Kingdom; for he had only just passed out of the garden into the park, when he found himself face to face with the missing Rector, to whom he said, laughingly:

"Well, this is fortunate! If I hadn't met you I should have started in a few hours to look for you. Miss Bligh was getting so anxious and uncomfortable at receiving no news that I promised just now to go to Vienna and find out whether you were dead or alive."

No responsive smile showed itself upon Mr. Lowndes's face.

"I ought, perhaps, to have written," he answered; "but I had hoped to be here before this, and there are things which it is more easy to say than to write. I may as well tell you at once that before poor young Bligh died, he confessed everything to me."

"Yes?" said Mark, without moving a muscle.

"You understand, I suppose, what I mean by everything. I know that Morton Bligh lost his life in a scuffle which he provoked, and that that unfortunate lad concealed the truth, fearing lest he should be accused of murder. I know that Coppard saw what had happened and reported it to you. I also know that you persuaded Archie to leave England, break off his engagement and join a gang of conspirators, who have had him assassinated because he declined to be himself an assassin."

"I thought you stated in your telegram that he had been killed in a duel," said Mark.

"So he was—if standing up to be shot and firing into the air can be called taking part in a duel. The fellow whom they told off to murder him didn't quite like the idea of stabbing him in the back, it seems; so to soothe his susceptibilities, Archie consented to go through the form of quarrelling with him. It was a distinction without a difference, for of course he was killed, though not—as was supposed—killed on the spot."

"I am sorry for it," said Mark. "I am sorry, too, that he told you his reasons for leaving England, because I am afraid you mean to distress Miss Bligh by repeating the story to her."

"Most undoubtedly I do."

"Well, it is for you to judge of the wisdom of such a proceeding. Am I mistaken in gathering from your tone that you think me to blame in this matter?"

"I don't care to disguise what I think," answered the Rector, bluntly. "I think that Archie's death lies at your door; I think you deceived him as to the character of the men to whom you induced him to swear obedience; I think you knew that by swearing obedience he was virtually throwing away his life; and I believe you did all this because, for purposes of your own, you wished to get rid of him."

"These are serious accusations, Mr. Lowndes," observed Mark. "I won't dwell upon the fact that they are both false and insulting, because clergymen, I believe, are licensed to say what they please without being called to account; but I think you will see that you ought either to substantiate or withdraw them. You charge me with having contrived Mr. Bligh's death for purposes of my own. To what purposes do you allude?"

The Rector did not much like answering the question, but could not see his way to shirk it.

"I think," said he, "that you wanted him to break off the engagement to his cousin in order that you might marry her yourself."

"I presumed that that was what you meant. But do not you see that, if that had been the case, I could very easily have got rid of him without sending him to Bulgaria? When Coppard told me what he had seen, it was evident that I could not allow Miss Bligh to marry her cousin until he had cleared himself of suspicion. Unhappily, he could not clear himself, and I suppose I should have been justified in repeating to her the information that I had received. I did not do

so because, in the first place, I wished to avoid giving her pain, and, in the second, I wished to give the unlucky man a chance of escaping. As to the confraternity to which I was the means of introducing him, I expressly warned him that assassination was not excluded from their list of weapons, although I thought it very unlikely that he would ever be employed as an assassin. I can only assure you that it is a matter of great surprise and regret to me that he should have been so employed."

"I can't acquit you, Mr. Chetwode," said the Rector, stubbornly. "Many people would believe the account that you give of your conduct, but I don't; and if that is an insult—well, of course it *is* an insult—I can't help it. I must incur the reproach of sheltering myself behind my cassock, that's all."

"My good sir," answered Mark, blandly, "your insults do not make me feel sore. I am sorry that you do not realize how ridiculous they are; but you are quite at liberty to repeat them to the entire neighbourhood. Impartial persons, I imagine, will know how to judge between us."

"I don't care two straws about the neighbourhood," returned the Rector; "it is of Cicely Bligh that I am thinking."

"I hope Miss Bligh will understand that in acting as I did I had no motive except to spare both her and her cousin."

"She may take that view, but I don't think she will. She is too straightforward. Your duty was plain enough: you ought to have persuaded an unfortunate, panic-stricken fellow to stand up like a man and face the drunken rascal who was his only accuser. Instead of that, you advised him to behave as though he had been guilty of murder, knowing all the time that he was as innocent as you or I."

"Pardon me, I did not know that. I may have believed in his innocence, but it was impossible for me

to know. I had his word for it that he was innocent, and another man's word for the contrary. You forget that he had already behaved as though he were guilty, and that confessions made under threat of exposure do not command much confidence. I doubt whether he could have cleared himself before the bar of public opinion, although I daresay no jury would have convicted him upon Coppard's evidence."

"Oh, you have made yourself very safe," answered Mr. Lowndes. "As I said before, I have no doubt that most people will exonerate you. But you will not be exonerated by me, nor, I think, will you be exonerated by Cicely. Meanwhile, I had better go in and see her. When I have had my say, you can have yours. I ought, by the way, to have mentioned to you that I came across your friend, Madame Souravieff, at a railway station on my way through Germany. She desired me to tell you that her husband is just dead and that he has left her a great deal of money. She said you would be glad to hear that."

If Mark was glad, he certainly did not look so. For the first time in the course of this colloquy, his face fell and his pale cheeks turned a shade paler. More unwelcome news could hardly have reached him, for he well knew that Madame Souravieff's liberty meant the probable termination of his own.

"If only I had had the courage to risk proposing this afternoon," he thought, ruefully, "I might now be able to point to an accomplished fact." He said aloud: "I am sorry to hear of Count Souravieff's death, but glad that he has provided handsomely for his widow. Did she tell you where she was going?"

"Yes; she was going to Paris. After that she intended to come to Abbotsport, for the purpose, as I understood, of seeing you."

Between Munich and London the Rector had had leisure to weigh certain words which had fallen from the Russian lady, as well as to listen to his wife's com-

ments upon the same. Consequently, he was able to appreciate and enjoy the discomfiture of Mr. Chetwode, who rejoined, with raised eyebrows:

"But if she comes to Abbotsport, where does she propose to stay? It would not be possible for me to receive her, I am afraid."

"She did not enter upon that question; I was only with her for ten minutes or so, and nearly all the time we were talking about other matters. About Archie Bligh's death, in fact. Well, Mr. Chetwode, I will wish you good-evening now. It hasn't been pleasant for me to speak to you as I have done; but I couldn't speak in any other way."

Mark raised his hat, turned on his heel, and walked away. His reflections as he tramped homewards were of the most gloomy description; for he knew Madame Souravieff well enough to know that she would not now tamely acquiesce in his marriage, and nothing was more certain than that she could prevent it if she chose. His only hope was in precipitating matters, so that he might be already engaged to Cicely when she arrived; and that hope was but a poor one. Such as it was, however, it must be made the best of, for no other remained. If (but it may be trusted that nothing so horrible can be true) the spirits of the departed are permitted to know what takes place in this world, the spirit of the late Count Souravieff must have been chuckling sardonically at that moment.

CHAPTER L.

CICELY DECIDES

MR. LOWNDES was not disappointed with the manner in which Cicely received the news which it was his duty to impart to her. He had hoped—but, bearing in mind the perversity of women, he had not been quite sure—

that she would accept Archie's dying statement as true; and it was a great relief to him to find that she did so unhesitatingly.

"I think Coppard has behaved very cruelly about it," she said. "If only he had told the truth at first, all this misery would have been avoided."

"Yes," sighed the Rector; "but what is still more unfortunate is that poor Archie himself did not tell the truth. Coppard, you must remember, probably believed him to be guilty. Well, it's useless to grieve over what is done and can't be undone. My own feeling is that the worst culprit of all is that man Chetwode. I'm glad I met him just now, and had an opportunity of telling him what I thought of him."

"Yes," agreed Cicely, musingly; "I am glad you met him."

But she did not seem disposed to say much either for or against this neighbour of hers, and the Rector before taking his leave could not refrain from uttering a few words of warning.

"You won't let that fellow talk you over, will you, Cicely? He has a plausible tongue, and his case, as he puts it, doesn't seem so bad."

"You needn't be alarmed," answered Cicely. "I took his part when you were all against him, and I still think I was right in taking his part, since I could not possibly guess the truth; but there never was any danger of—of what you were afraid of."

"Wasn't there? So much the better, then. I myself, as you know, always gave you credit for being true to Archie in your heart. Mrs. Lowndes thinks differently, but Mrs. Lowndes is not always right."

"She is right this time. I am dreadfully sorry—more sorry than I can tell you—for what has happened, and if he had lived I should have married him, perhaps—I don't know. But I never cared for him as he wished to be cared for, and I ought never to have accepted him.

I suppose it isn't in me to care for anybody in that way."

"As you are a human being, my dear," answered Mr. Lowndes, smiling, "I think we may safely assume that you possess that capacity, and that the proper person will turn up in due season."

Cicely shook her head.

"No; I shall end my days as an old maid. Perhaps, after all, that is the wisest thing for an heiress to do. Aunt Susan, who is always protesting that she means to go away, will stay and take care of me, I daresay."

But this modest programme, when unfolded to Miss Skipwith later in the evening, proved to be not at all to that lady's taste. She had made up her mind that Mark Chetwode was the right husband for Cicely, and she was not to be moved from her opinion because it was pointed out to her, firstly, that Mr. Chetwode was not a formal candidate for the honour in question; secondly, that Cicely had never regarded him as more than a friend; and, thirdly, that grave doubts must now be felt even as to his friendliness.

"Ah, that is it!" she exclaimed. "You are angry with him for not having at once told you all he knew. As if he had any right to betray other people's secrets! It seems to me that he behaved with the utmost kindness and consideration both to you and to that misguided young man. Of course, all that about the secret society and the duel is very sad and very dreadful; but I don't see how you can blame Mr. Chetwode for it."

"I didn't say that I blamed him, did I?" asked Cicely, who in truth had said very little upon the subject.

"No, but you evidently do blame him, and I think that is most unfair. If he had wished to do your cousin an ill turn, what would have been simpler for him than to denounce the murderer? Now, you need not look so angry, my dear; I am not saying for one moment that

your cousin *was* a murderer. Only I think you must admit that he behaved like one, and that it was for him, not for Mr. Chetwode, to disprove Coppard's assertions."

It was, in fact, tolerably apparent that Miss Skipwith was not quite convinced of Archie's innocence; and as she was a person to whom conviction could not easily be brought home, Cicely said no more.

When Mark arrived at the Priory on the following morning, the old lady, who had witnessed his approach from an upper window, ran down into the hall and intercepted him.

"Oh, Mr. Chetwode," she whispered, breathlessly (for the servants were within hearing), "may I say one word to you before you see Cicely? She has been very much distressed by this sad news which Mr. Lowndes has brought us, and I fear she is not best pleased with you about it. But she will come round—I am sure she will come round if you still have patience. I do want you to be patient with her to-day."

"If I have any virtue at all," answered Mark, "I suppose it is patience. At all events, I can promise to lose neither my patience nor my temper with Miss Bligh. Thank you for preparing me, though."

He passed on with a smile upon his lips, but with a sinking pain at his heart; for he was pretty sure that if Cicely had begun by condemning him, his pleas in justification of what he had done would have but little effect upon her. His hope had been that she would be driven to range herself on his side by the hostile bias of Mr. Lowndes. And so, when he was shown into her presence, her frigid greeting did not take him by surprise.

"I am glad that Mr. Lowndes has returned safe and sound," he began; "but I am afraid that what you have heard from him has made you unhappy."

"It has certainly made me unhappy," answered Cicely; "from first to last it seems to have been a

series of wretched mistakes and misfortunes. Archie would have been alive now if he had had an honest friend to advise him."

"You mean, of course, that I was not an honest friend to him. Yet I endeavoured to be so, and if the case were to arise again I should not act differently. Mr. Lowndes and I had something like an altercation about it yesterday, as I daresay you have heard. I didn't convince him; but perhaps I may be able to convince you. Will you at least allow me to try?"

"If you wish," answered Cicely.

"I fully admit that I was more desirous of serving and protecting you than him, and that you were my first thought throughout; nevertheless, I helped him to the best of my ability. Knowing what I knew, I could not possibly stand aside and see you married to him; but I thought there was no occasion for your ever hearing the painful circumstances connected with your brother's death. Bligh himself admitted that there was nothing for him to do but to leave the place, and he was very anxious to see active service somewhere. It was to gratify his wish that I introduced him to these Bulgarian patriots, who are always upon the point of getting up an insurrection, and perhaps will get one up some day. So far I have nothing to regret. What I do regret extremely is that they should have employed him as they did. You don't, I hope, imagine that I had anything to do with that?"

"Oh, no; I could not believe such a thing!"

"Mr. Lowndes apparently does; but that is of no consequence. The fact is that I knew these men did not stick at assassination, and I said as much to Bligh; but I added what I thought was the truth, that they were most unlikely to select him for work of that kind, and why they did it I cannot in the least understand. From the moment that he disobeyed them, they were sure to inflict the penalty of death upon him; he must

have been made aware of that when he took the oath."

Mark paused; but Cicely seemed to have no observation to make. It was only when he was about to speak again that she checked him by saying:

"I suppose you knew all this time how he had died, did you not?"

"I knew nothing at all about it," answered Mark. It has already been mentioned that his standard of veracity was not that of the ordinary Briton.

"You guessed, perhaps. At any rate, you could not have thought that he had been killed in the way that you suggested to me."

"Are you displeased with me because I deceived you?" asked Mark. "But what else could I do? My one wish was to spare you the pain of this discovery, and if I did not tell you the truth—which, as far as that goes, I was not at liberty to do—I could only suggest something to you which was not the truth."

"Was it necessary to suggest calumnies about your friend Madame Souravieff? But I daresay your intentions were good, and I suppose I ought to thank you for having troubled yourself to consider my feelings."

"Do you remember what I told you yesterday?" asked Mark. "I said there was nothing in the world that I would not do for you; and certainly I would do much worse things for your sake than to attribute one additional flirtation to Madame Souravieff. I think I had better say now what you must have guessed long ago—that I love you with all my heart and soul. I know very well that I am no match for you; I am neither rich enough, nor great enough, nor young enough, nor worthy of you in any way whatsoever. Yet—nobody will ever love you again as I love you. And sometimes I have dared to hope that, as you had allowed me to be your friend, you might at length be induced to let me be more than your friend."

He spoke clearly, but his voice broke once or twice, and she could see that his hands were trembling. There was at least no doubt about his being in earnest, and that perhaps made her answer him more gently than she had at first intended to do. She said:

"I am very sorry that you have had hopes of that kind, Mr. Chetwode, but I don't think I have ever done anything to encourage them. I did look upon you as a friend, and I should still, if——"

"Ah!" interrupted Mark, "don't cast me off because I acted in what seemed to me the only possible manner to act. Try for one moment to imagine yourself situated as I was: what would you have done?"

"I should have told the truth," answered Cicely, promptly; "or at all events I should have persuaded Archie to tell it. But, as I said before, I am willing to believe that you meant well. Only you and I evidently look at things from different points of view."

"That means that you can't or won't forgive me. Let us say, then, that I was altogether wrong; is it no excuse that I did wrong for love of you?"

"I don't think you quite understand," said Cicely, evading a direct reply, "that all this has nothing to do with my refusing you. I could not marry a man whom I do not love."

"Yet you were ready to marry your cousin without loving him."

"Yes; I accepted him, and I was wrong. I would not do it again, even to please my father, who wished for it so much. You cannot suppose that I shall repeat the mistake in the case of another person, who has no such claim upon me."

For some seconds Mark sat silent and motionless, gazing at the opposite wall. His self-possession, which had been momentarily shaken, seemed to have returned to him, and it was in his customary level voice that he said:

"I did not flatter myself that you cared for me; I was prepared to be rejected. Still, when one has only a single hope in life, one likes to assure oneself that it is quite dead before burying it. I must not ask you the question; but I believe I may assume that you don't love any man. So long as that is the case, may there not be yet the shadow of a chance for a man who cannot live without you?"

"Not the very smallest," answered Cicely, somewhat more harshly, for she thought his language exaggerated. "I don't know how I can be more explicit than I have been. If you were to ask me a hundred times I could only give you the same answer."

"You are absolutely certain of that?"

"Absolutely certain."

"Then," said Mark, rising slowly, "I know the worst. Which is always a sort of comfort, is it not?"

His face was deadly pale, and the smile which he forced his lips to assume was not participated in by his eyes.

"Good-bye, Miss Bligh," he added, presently. "I shall never see you again."

"Oh, why should you say that," exclaimed Cicely, for she was really shocked by the man's appearance. "We cannot help meeting again if you stay here, and —and if I have spoken unkindly I am sorry for it. I can't pretend to be pleased with the way you have behaved about Archie; but I shall try not to think of that."

"It does not signify," answered Mark, with the same sickly smile. "Whether you think well or badly of me, or forget me altogether, it will make no difference, for I shall never know. In a few days' time I shall leave Upton Chetwode, and it is very certain that I shall not return. If I believed in astrology, I should say that I had been born under an unlucky star; but I haven't even the good fortune to believe in that or in anything else. Good-bye."

He turned away without shaking hands, and did not so much as turn his head when he reached the door for a last look at the girl whom he loved. Cicely was sorry for him; but he was not the first man whom she had been compelled to reject, and she had reason to believe that the pain caused by rejection does not last for any inordinate length of time. Was not Bobby Dare, for instance, a striking example of the facility with which such wounds may be healed?

CHAPTER LI.

MARK TAKES LEAVE OF ABBOTSPORT.

AFTER dinner that evening Mark said to his faithful French valet:

"Have you had enough of England, Louis?"

The man made no articulate reply, but shrugged his shoulders, displayed the palms of his hands and drew down the corners of his mouth expressively.

"Well, you will soon be able to turn your back upon this dreary island. I have made up my mind to leave Upton Chetwode, and I daresay I shall have wound up my affairs by to-morrow night. You have served me very well, Louis, and, all things considered, you have grumbled wonderfully little. It is only fair that I should make you a small present now that I am closing the establishment."

Two five-pound notes were then handed to the factotum, whose astonishment was not less profound than his gratitude; for, though Mr. Chetwode had never been an illiberal master, he could not afford to give away ten pounds every day, and of this his servant was well aware.

The whole of the next morning Mark was engaged in writing, in looking through old letters and papers,

and in destroying them when read. In the afternoon he saw his bailiff and his gardener, informed them that he was about to quit England for good, and added that the place would in all probability be let again before long. To each of the three house-servants he gave a month's wages in lieu of warning, together with gratuities which they considered handsome. He had not hitherto taken much notice of any of them, which was perhaps the reason why they now sang his praises loudly and regretted his proposed departure. It is scarcely necessary to add that they could form a shrewd guess as to the cause of this abrupt retreat on his part, and it was their opinion that he bore his disappointment admirably. He looked a little sad, it was true, and there were dark semicircles under his eyes; but they had never known him so affable before, nor could they think that Miss Bligh had been well advised in refusing a gentleman whose temper was under such perfect control.

His self-control was about to be put to a tolerably severe test; for at five o'clock Louis came into his study to announce that Madame Souravieff was in the drawing-room.

"Already!" he ejaculated, involuntarily. But he passed his hand over his forehead as if to smooth away the frown which had gathered there, and went at once to receive his visitor.

He found her standing by the window, looking rather unlike herself in her deep mourning. There was a bright colour in her cheeks, and she seemed to be agitated and excited.

"You expected me?" was the first thing that she said.

"Not quite so soon," answered Mark, with his faint smile. "Mr. Lowndes told me that you were coming here; but he said you were bound for Paris in the first instance."

"I went to Paris; but one cannot get dresses made

in a week, and I was devoured with impatience. I bought some ready-made abominations; after all, what did it signify? Now, tell me at once, and tell me quickly—is all well?"

"All is well," replied Mark, tranquilly. "I am as free as it is possible to be; for I have done what you wished me to do, and Miss Bligh has refused me in the most unambiguous terms."

Madame Souravieff drew a long breath.

"If you knew how frightened I have been!" she exclaimed. "I had a presentiment that I should find you engaged to that girl and that you would tell me, in your cold way, that honour compelled you to fulfil your engagement. Thank God, I shall not now be driven to do things of which I should have been ashamed after they were done!"

"I think you must really care a little for me, Olga," said Mark.

"Yes—a little," she answered, with an unsteady laugh. "It isn't wrong or dangerous to tell you so any longer. I never told you so before; I always held you rather at arm's length, didn't I? But now—now!"

Well, now there was only one thing to be done, and Mark did it manfully. What his thoughts and feelings may have been while the woman he had once loved was sobbing on his shoulder, it is needless to inquire too closely. Perhaps a little shame and a little regret were included amongst them. No doubt, too, he was glad that she believed him to be by nature undemonstrative.

When she had calmed down a little and had seated herself in one of the easy-chairs which she had left in Mark's scantily furnished abode on the expiration of her tenancy, a passing feeling of curiosity prompted him to ask:

"What would you have done, Olga, if you had found me formally betrothed to Miss Bligh?"

"I suppose," answered Madame Souravieff, "I should have gone to her and told her that you were not in love

with her, but with me; that I had urged you to marry her because you were poor and she was rich, and that, being now rich and independent myself, I no longer cared to resign you to her. It would have been humiliating for me, and I should have hated myself afterwards for having done it; but I believe that is what I should have done. Did she give any reason for refusing you?"

"The best of all reasons; she had no sort of love for me, she said."

"Yet it seemed to me—but no matter! All that is over and done with; we are going to be happy now and forget the miserable past. Shall we live in England, Mark?"

"That is for you to decide. For my own part, I should prefer almost any other country. I have no very pleasant associations with this place, and I am not sure that we should be precisely popular with our neighbours. There is a prevalent impression among them that you or I, or both of us, are answerable for the disappearance of that unfortunate young Bligh; and the true history of that disappearance, which will probably be made public before long, will scarcely tend to exonerate me in their eyes. By the way, I am at liberty to tell you the true history now."

"You need not; I heard it all from Mr. Lowndes, and I forgive you for having misled me about it. Besides, what do I care, so long as you love me? When I spoke of living in England I didn't mean living here, which would suit neither of us. We are accustomed to the life of cities, and we can't do without it, except for an interval of repose every now and then. In London we should have friends and interests, and if you could obtain a seat in Parliament, which ought not to be difficult——"

"I might use my natural powers of eloquence on behalf of the cause of Panslavism."

"Without joking, an English Member of Parliament who understood something about Russia would be a

valuable man to both countries. *Apropos*, I am taking leave of certain friends of ours. That poor Boris made it a condition of his will that I should withdraw from all secret political societies, and fortunately I am able to comply. Still—England is a safe country."

Mark acquiesced. He seemed ready to acquiesce in anything and everything, and did not even wince when his companion said plainly that she saw no reason for deferring their marriage. He only observed:

"I suppose there will be certain preliminary formalities to be gone through?"

"Oh, yes; but they will not occupy more than a few weeks, I should think, and of course the ceremony will be performed in the quietest possible manner. And then we could go away to some quiet place, and nobody would know anything about it until a decent interval had elapsed. We might even part for a time if you thought it better."

"It is better to be as conventional as one can, perhaps. And that reminds me that your being here is just a shade unconventional. I don't wish to seem inhospitable; but——"

"Did you think I had come to stay with you?" asked Madame Souravieff, laughing. "My dear Mark, I am not quite so devoid of all sense of propriety as that. I am only paying a friendly call, and presently I shall return to the Seven Stars, where I have engaged rooms."

"The Seven Stars!" exclaimed Mark. "But you cannot possibly stay there; it is nothing but a village public-house!"

"I can't help it if Abbotsport provides such poor accommodation for travellers. I had to find some sort of a roof to shelter me, and I daresay they will be able to give me some eggs and bacon to eat, which is all that I want."

"Yes; but I wasn't thinking of the discomfort. By this time it is probably known all over the place that

you are here, and I leave you to imagine what inferences will be drawn from your presence."

"Really, I don't very much care what Abbotsport thinks or says of me. However, you will be relieved to hear that I have taken all due precautions. I announced, immediately after my arrival, that I had come down to see about the furniture which I left here, and I am now supposed to be taking an inventory of it. Taking an inventory is a tedious process, isn't it? One might, perhaps, prolong the operation over three days without exciting astonishment."

"I don't think you could spend three days in a wayside tavern," answered Mark. "Besides, there is no occasion for it. The best plan would be for you to go up to London to-morrow, and on the following day I could join you. I shall have finished all that I have to do here by that time."

"Well, perhaps you are right. The Seven Stars is neither as clean nor as quiet as it might be, and I am not particularly anxious to meet Miss Bligh or Mr. Lowndes, or any of these people. Mark, I want you to tell me something—only I suppose you won't."

"What is it?" inquired Mark.

"Are you sure that you are not a little disappointed at losing that girl?"

"Do I look like a disappointed man?"

"You don't look like anything—you never do. But I can't forget that she is young and pretty, while I am——"

"You are yourself, my dear Olga. Isn't that enough?"

"It is, if you think so."

"Apparently I think so. We shall never be any younger, you and I; we have passed the age of passionate love, or at all events we ought to have passed it; our ideas of happiness are not what they used to be. You see that when you think of the future, you dream of politics and society and ambition, you don't

dream of a cottage in a sequestered valley. Still there is no reason why two people of our time of life should not be happy together in their own way."

"How cold you are!" exclaimed Madame Souravieff.

"I was hot enough in the old days, wasn't I? It was you who used to chill me then."

"I was obliged to be chilling sometimes. But I loved you then and I love you now."

Mark sighed and looked at her for a moment with a certain air of sadness and contrition. Then he abruptly lowered his eyes.

"Yet, if I were to die to-morrow, you would not weep for me very long," he remarked.

For an instant Madame Souravieff seemed inclined to quarrel with him; but she thought better of it and only laughed.

"I should weep for you longer than you deserved," she returned; "longer than you would weep for me, I suspect. However, I hope you will survive until the day after to-morrow, when you will find me and your dinner waiting at the Hôtel Métropole. As nobody will know or care anything about us there, we may take the liberty of dining together, I suppose."

After Madame Souravieff had left him, Mark gave a great sigh, which it was as well that she could not hear, because it was only too evidently one of relief. He then returned to his papers and spent the remainder of the afternoon and evening in his study, only leaving it for half an hour at dinner-time. The next morning he told Louis there was nothing more to be done except to pack up.

"I am going down to the village to pay a few bills," he added; "if I am not in by two o'clock you will know that I don't want any luncheon. See that Madame Souravieff's furniture is separated from the rest, so that it may be sent up to London when it is wanted."

He gave a few more orders, and then, leaving the house, sauntered for the last time down the hill towards Abbotsport. It was a sunny morning, but the grass was still drenched with the heavy autumn dew, and a haze hung upon the surface of the calm sea. High overhead the pale-blue sky was streaked with mares'-tails for the admonition of the weatherwise, while every point and headland along the broken coast-line stood out with curious distinctness. But Mark, who did not raise his eyes from the ground as he walked, took no note of sea, sky, or shore, nor did he care whether a change of weather was brewing or not. When he reached the village he quickened his pace and was soon down upon the beach, where he had so often chanced to meet Cicely. He did not meet her now—indeed, he would not have been there if there had been any risk of meeting her at that hour of the day—but presently he encountered a seafaring man, who touched his hat, and whom he scrutinized keenly for a moment, before saying:

"Well, Coppard!"

"Well, sir," returned Coppard, in somewhat aggrieved accents.

"I imagine, from the look of your face, that you have seen Mr. Lowndes."

"Seen him yesterday afternoon," answered Coppard, sullenly. "Now, I don't bear no grudge agin parsons for preachin'; 'tis their trade to preach and they must do the best they can at it once a week, same as butchers and bakers and chimney-sweepers must on the other days. But I don't see no need for sermons out o' church, nor I don't care to be called a liar, whether by parson or layman."

"Has Mr. Lowndes been calling you a liar?" inquired Mark, smiling.

"Well—there! I don't know what he didn't call me. 'Dear me, sir!' I says at last, 'to hear the way you go on, anybody'd think as I'd bin paid to keep back what

I know, or else paid for tellin' of it. Whereas,' I says, ''tis no such thing. Little enough did I ever see o' that pore young gentleman's money, and little enough o' Mr. Chetwode's either, if you come to that.'"

"You shall see a sovereign of Mr. Chetwode's money now," said Mark, producing that coin. "I really couldn't offer you payment before; it wouldn't have been prudent. But now, everything is to be made known, it seems; added to which I am upon the point of leaving the place; so I can do as I please. Did Mr. Lowndes give you any instructions as to what you were to reveal?"

"I don't know as I rightly understand you, sir."

"Did he tell you that you were to say you saw Mr. Bligh push his cousin over the cliff?"

"He did not, sir. That's just what he went so far as to call a lie."

"It was rude of him to use such words, but, as to the fact, he was right; because you didn't see that, you know. What you did see, according to your own account, was that one of the men rolled over the cliff and that the other was within an ace of following him. The truth, I believe, is that Morton Bligh tried to murder his cousin and very nearly succeeded, and that his death was an accident."

"That's what the Rector says, sir," observed Coppard.

"Well, you are not in a position to contradict him, I should say. I think he and Miss Bligh are making a mistake in saying anything about the matter; but they must do what they consider best. Only, as you have always professed to be attached to Miss Bligh, I hope you won't add to the distress which all this is certain to cause her by pretending to know more than you actually do know."

Coppard asseverated, truly enough, that from first to last his wish had been to avoid distressing Miss Cicely, and Mark replied:

"Well, I believe you. Of course, you can understand that the only thing for you to do now is to back up her

account of the affair. Now, Coppard, do you think you could find me a boat? I have a fancy for pulling out into the bay this fine morning."

"I'll take 'ee out, sir," answered Coppard. "Want any lines and bait?"

"No, thank you; and I sha'n't want you either. I am going out by myself."

"As *you* please, sir; but don't you get too far from shore. 'Tis comin' on to blow afore long, you may depend, and if you was to have the wind and tide agin you, I don't know but what you might find the job a bit more'n you could manage."

"Oh, I'll take care of myself," answered Mark; and soon afterwards he was seated in the little open boat which Coppard had as usual borrowed from a neighbour.

He pulled, with long, steady strokes, straight out to sea, while Coppard, who had stood watching him for a minute or two, went up to the Seven Stars to get change for the sovereign, and drink a glass or so of beer for the good of the house.

How many glasses of beer Cappord had drunk before the gale which raged for the next twenty-four hours had begun to announce itself with gusts from the north-eastward it is needless to inquire. He was at all events quite sober and a good deal alarmed at three o'clock in the afternoon, when the sea was covered with white-crested waves and no trace of Mr. Chetwode or the borrowed boat could be discovered. Whatever may have been Coppard's failings, want of pluck was not one of them. He persuaded two of his mates to join him on board a lugger, and bore away down channel in search of the missing man, who, as he very well knew, must either have got ashore somewhere or be in imminent peril by that time. They had a rough experience of it, running before the wind, and a still rougher one when they had to beat back against it, after finding the boat, which was floating bottom upwards, some ten miles away to the south-westward; but of Mark

Chetwode nothing was ever seen again. The sea does not give up its dead, and dead men tell no tales. There was nothing in the circumstances to justify a suspicion of suicide; yet more than one person was secretly convinced that when Mark pushed off from shore that morning he had no intention of returning. Be that as it may, one may safely take it for granted that the loss of his life was less bitter to him than the loss of all that he had cared to live for. He was a man who had never been much liked, and had probably been only once loved—which in itself was tantamount to saying that he had been singularly unlucky. For his good qualities were really in excess of his bad ones, and if the latter had seemed to hold more sway over his conduct than the former, that also, perhaps, had been rather the result of bad luck than of deliberate choice. As he himself had foreseen would be the case, he was very soon forgotten.

CHAPTER LII.

CONCLUSION

ONE afternoon, some weeks after the events chronicled in the last chapter, Cicely Bligh went out for a ride all by herself. It seemed probable that, whether she rode or drove or walked, in future she would be all by herself; and that, no doubt, was one reason why she was in very low spirits. Solitude, which is sad for everybody, is doubly sad for the young. Cicely, looking forward into the future, saw that there would henceforth be no companionship for her save that of Miss Skipwith, and although she was sure of having plenty of duties to fill up her time, she was equally sure that there would be very few pleasures to relieve the monotony of managing a large estate. If you are happy, it is an immense blessing to be also rich; but if you are

unhappy, wealth is but a poor compensation to fall back upon, and Cicely thought she had good reasons for being unhappy. One short year had robbed her of so much! She had lost her father; she had lost her cousin, who had at least been her true lover; finally, she had lost one whom she would fain have believed to be her friend. Nothing remained to her except material comfort, and as she had enjoyed that all her life long, she naturally set little store by it. However, she thought a gallop would do her good, and when she had reached the breezy downs and had given her horse his head she certainly did feel all the better for the fresh air and exercise. Only, as she was returning homewards in the dusk of evening, her heart began to sink once more. She knew what was before her—dinner with Aunt Susan, a little playing of the piano while Aunt Susan nodded in her chair; then bed, but not necessarily sleep. And it would be the same to-morrow night, and the next night, and for an endless vista of coming nights. One must be forty at the very least to contemplate such an outlook without shuddering.

Now, while Cicely was still some little distance from her own door, she descried in front of her the figure of a certain young man whom she recognized, and, touching her horse with her heel, she cantered across the grass until she overtook him, not ill-pleased to lay aside her sombre meditations for a time.

Bobby Dare turned round when she drew rein beside him, and took off his hat.

"I was going to pay my respects to you," said he. "Are you at home?"

"I shall be presently," answered Cicely. "As I have met you, we may as well walk on together."

She beckoned to her groom, and, telling him to trot on to the stables, jumped lightly to the ground, disregarding Bobby's proffered assistance.

"It seems ages since I saw you last," she went

on in a very friendly tone—for, indeed, Bobby had spent the preceding fortnight in London. "How is your arm now? You have discarded the sling, I see."

"Oh, yes," he answered, cheerfully. "I've discarded the sling, and I'm pronounced to be fit for service. I hope to be afloat again before long."

"You don't mean to leave the Navy, then?" asked Cicely; and there seemed to be a slight suspicion of disappointment in her voice.

"Not for worlds! Why should I?"

"Well, I thought that, as you are rich now, or at least comparatively rich—and by the way, I have never had an opportunity of telling you how glad I was to hear that poor Archie had left his money to you. He could not have left it to a truer friend."

"Thank you for saying so; but I'm afraid I don't deserve to have such things said of me. The truth is, that if I befriended him it wasn't so much for his sake as for yours."

"You did your best to befriend us both, and I suppose you were right in almost everything that you said, and I ought to eat a great dish of humble pie. Only I can't even now feel convinced that Mr. Chetwode was quite as bad as you thought him. And—and he is dead, you see!"

Bobby nodded. He had not altered his opinion of Mark; but there was no longer any occasion for him to give expression to it. After a short interval of silence, he reverted to the original topic of discussion.

"Of course, I could afford to live without any profession now," he said, "and my people rather want me to retire; but it seems to me that I should be a very great fool if I did. I couldn't spend the rest of my life loafing about down here with nothing to occupy me."

"I suppose you couldn't," agreed Cicely. "Selfishly speaking, I am sorry that you are going away,

because I shall miss you dreadfully; but for your own sake I am glad."

"Will you really miss me?" asked Bobby; "or do you only say that out of kindness?"

"I say it because it is true. I haven't so many friends left here that I can afford to lose one."

"Well," observed Bobby, "it is something to know that you look upon me as a friend."

"Did I ever look upon you as anything else?"

"At one time I thought you did. I seemed to be rather meddlesome, and perhaps I was; but I couldn't help it."

"Oh, you were right. Haven't I just confessed as much?"

"My intentions were good, at all events. I said to myself: 'As there is no hope for you, you might as well give another honest fellow a chance, if you can.'" He added, after a momentary pause, "I suppose there *is* no hope?"

"I don't quite know what you mean," answered Cicely, with pardonable mendacity.

"I mean, of course, that I love you, and that I always shall. Jane says I ought to ask you again, but I know it's quite useless."

"I thought you had got over that long ago," said Cicely, without looking at him.

"Oh, no, I haven't got over it, and I don't [illegible] get over it. I'm not sure that I even wish [illegible] it. But I have never deceived myself about [illegible]. You may not have cared for any one else; but you [illegible] certainly never cared for me."

Cicely raised her eyes for a moment and glanced at the handsome young face beside her. All of a sudden she seemed to know that she had always loved him. It was hardly a discovery: it was only an admission, and if she had not made the admission to herself before, that was only because she had imagined that his boyish flame had died down. Nevertheless, she felt that it

would be impossible for her to accept him. Within the last few months she had been engaged to one man and had been upon the point—or, at any rate, everybody thought so—of engaging herself to another; could she, now that her two lovers were dead, seem to console herself with this third one as a *pis-aller?* No! that would be too humiliating and would look too heartless. So she replied:

"I am very grateful to you, and I only wish I were more worthy of your love; but—but you will find somebody more worthy in time. As for me, I shall never marry."

"You mean that you will never marry me," observed Bobby, smiling. "Well—I knew that."

They walked on in silence for some little distance; but, when they neared the house, Bobby resumed:

"I don't think I'll go in with you. One can't talk when one knows that one will have to say good-bye in a few minutes. I'll say good-bye now, please."

"Are you going away immediately, then?" asked Cicely.

"Yes; I hope so. There's nothing to keep me here now, and though I didn't in the least expect any other answer than the answer that you have given me, still—it *is*, in a sort of way, a disappointment. Do what one will, one can't quite help hoping against hope."

Cicely gave him her hand.

"Well," she said, "good-bye, if it must be good-bye." She added, half involuntarily, "Don't forget me."

Now, it is evident that ordinary kindness of feeling should have made her wish that he might forget her; and even if she did not wish it, it would have been only in accordance with immemorial custom to say that she did. Possibly some dim perception of this may have crossed his mind, for he coloured up suddenly and looked her straight in the face, which he had not done before.

"I don't know," Cicely said to him, about ten minutes afterwards, how you can have seen anything in my face that you might not have seen long ago, if you hadn't been so desperately stupid. But, perhaps, you weren't really as stupid as you pretended to be. I believe you knew all about it from the first—though I assure you I didn't."

"The first!" repeated Bobby, wonderingly. "What do you call the first? Not that miserable night of the dance, when you refused me in such decisive terms?"

"Yes, that same wretched night. I was dreadfully unhappy after it, and though I didn't know why I was unhappy, you might have known. Are you sure you didn't?"

"I am quite sure," answered Bobby; "and until a few minutes ago I was quite sure that you cared about as much for me as you do for—for old Lowndes. When I wake up to-morrow morning I shall certainly think that all this is a dream."

"You will very soon be convinced that it is an awful reality," sighed Cicely. "People won't exactly condole with you because I am so rich; but I'm afraid they will congratulate you in a rather ironical manner, and I know just what they will say about me."

However, Cicely did her neighbours an injustice; for nobody said anything disagreeable about her when it was announced that she was engaged to Bobby Dare, nor did any one grudge him his good fortune. The general opinion was that she might have done a great deal worse; and in this instance the general opinion was probably correct—which is not always the case. For Cicely is ruled by her affections, and as she adores her husband, who is a very sensible man, there is good reason to hope that the duties of which he has declined to relieve her will be discharged more satisfactorily than they would have been, had she carried out her intention of remaining single.

Nothing more has been seen or heard of Madame Souravieff in Abbotsport, but the outer world sees a good deal of her. For some time after Mark Chetwode's death she lived in the strictest seclusion, and when she somewhat abruptly emerged from it all traces of youth had left her. Her hair is grey, her face is lined, and at times she looks very sad; but more often she is cheerful and talkative and busied with political affairs. For in this world everything comes to an end —sorrow and joy and love and life itself. Stories, too, come to an end at last, and patient readers are released.

PRINTED BY BALLANTYNE, HANSON AND CO.
LONDON AND EDINBURGH

00090752

Digitized with financial assistance from the
Government of Maharashtra
on 05 October, 2018